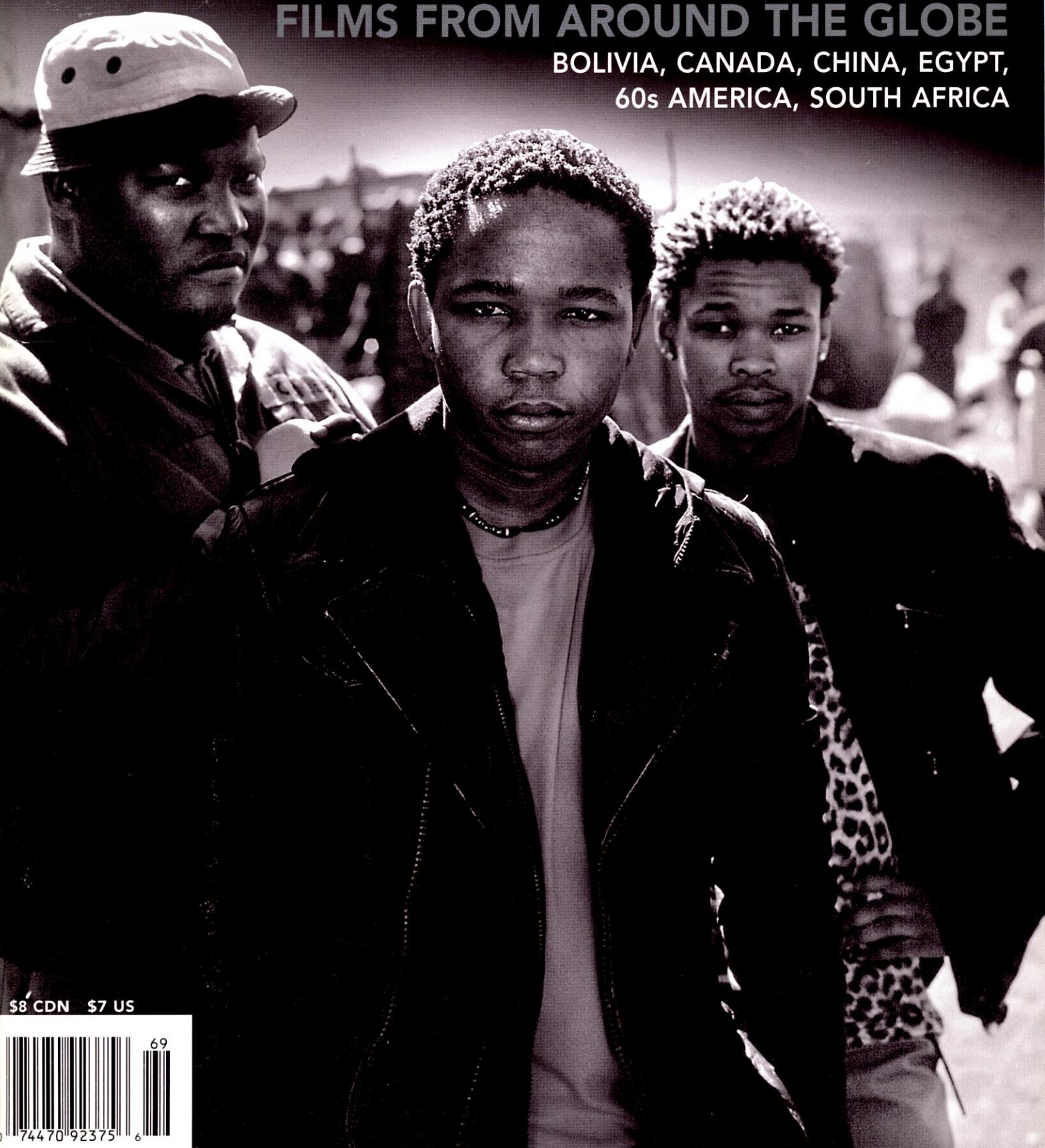


CineACTION

ISSUE 69 2006

FILMS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

BOLIVIA, CANADA, CHINA, EGYPT,
60s AMERICA, SOUTH AFRICA



\$8 CDN \$7 US

69



THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

Design: Bob Wilcox

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FILMS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

This issue of *CineAction* travels widely around world cinema.

Malek Khouri explores the art and politics of Arab cinema and one of the most important films of Egyptian director Youssef Chahine. **Michael Sofair** presents a close analysis of the debut film of Bolivian director **Rodrigo Bellot**. **Peter Harcourt** traces the imagery of the rural in a lineage of Quebec films. **Robin Wood** celebrates the films of Nova Scotia filmmaker **William MacGillivray**. **Michael Zryd** and **Nicola Galombik** take us back to 60s America and the film and theatre of the underground. We also feature an interview with young Chinese director **Wang Xiashuai** by **Alice Shih**.

The issue concludes with several shorter reviews of recent Canadian films and an incisive introduction to new cinema of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, premiering at recent film festivals in Los Angeles and Mannheim.

—*Scott Forsyth*

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 70 PROTEST AND REVOLUTION

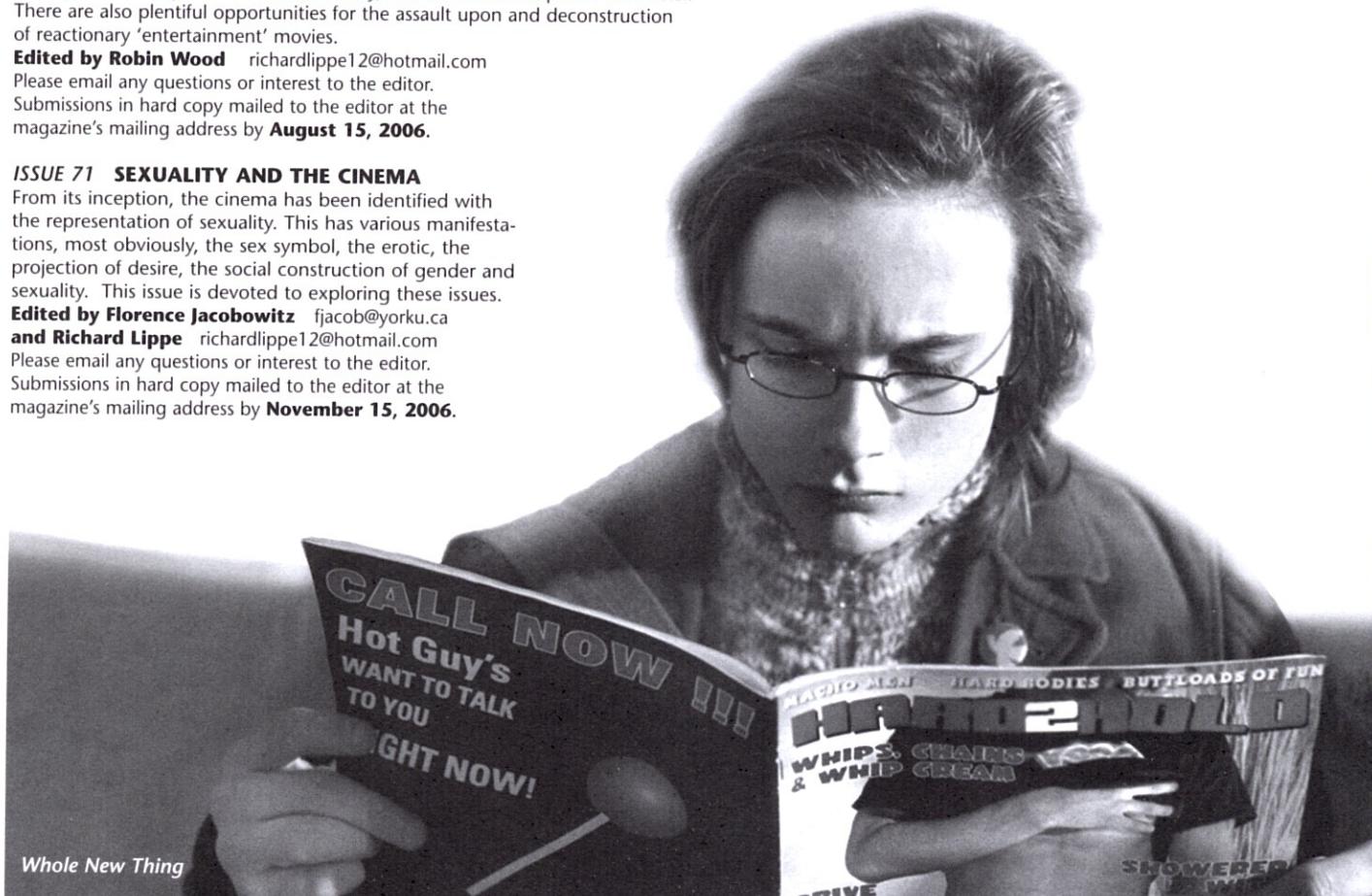
In view of the current world situation it seems important to make an attempt to restore *CineAction* to its original Leftist roots, which I feel have been to some degree eaten away by the pervasive discouragement and despair of the past decade. I would like articles on films past and present that deal with explicitly political issues (I propose to write my own contribution on *Salt of the Earth*, the film, its production and its aftermath). Our western world has perhaps reached a turning point where overt rage and disillusionment can find open expression. Recent political documentaries such as *The Corporation*, or the films of Michael Moore, demand attention. Even Hollywood seems to be awakening from its recent stupor to produce films with direct political and provocative agendas (*The Constant Gardener*, *Jarhead*, *Syriana*, *Goodnight and Good Luck...*) which repay careful critical scrutiny, and the more outspoken the better. There are also plentiful opportunities for the assault upon and deconstruction of reactionary 'entertainment' movies.

Edited by Robin Wood richardlippe12@hotmail.com
Please email any questions or interest to the editor.
Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at the magazine's mailing address by **August 15, 2006**.

ISSUE 71 SEXUALITY AND THE CINEMA

From its inception, the cinema has been identified with the representation of sexuality. This has various manifestations, most obviously, the sex symbol, the erotic, the projection of desire, the social construction of gender and sexuality. This issue is devoted to exploring these issues.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe fjacob@yorku.ca richardlippe12@hotmail.com
Please email any questions or interest to the editor.
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Whole New Thing

Images of the Rural

THE CINEMA OF QUEBEC

BY PETER HARCOURT

In 1964 when Gilles Groulx made *Le Chat dans le sac*, he defined for Quebec the sensibility of a generation. Although Pierre Perrault's *Pour la suite du monde* and Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre* appeared at about the same time, it was Groulx's film that spoke to the politicized French Canadians who were soon to become Québécois.

The film presents the story of Claude/Claude Godbout, a young urban intellectual who is discontented with his life as a French Canadian but doesn't know what to do about it. Impatience is his response to everything he encounters—impatience and intolerance. Like the protagonist in Jacques Godbout's novel, *Le Couteau sur la table* (1965), Claude is involved with a Jewish Anglophone believing that, as a member of an equally oppressed minority, she might have some sympathy for the French Canadian cause. Finally, however, he abandons her and retreats to the country—as if to find his way through being surrounded by his own people. In effect, he returns to the land.¹

Le retour à la terre. That phrase possessed a mantric power in early French Canadian philosophy, as if part of a collective ontology. It suggests a longing for the pastoral—for a prelapsarian way of life that existed before the assaults of urbanized capitalism. It is also inextricably intertwined with French Canadian Catholicism and its insistence on the spiritual value of an agricultural way of life.

Whatever the reality, this was the ideal—an ideal preached from the pulpit every Sunday morning. There was no more passionate an advocate of this ideal than Abbé Lionel Groulx (1878-1967) who in books such as *La Naissance d'une race* (1919) and *Notre Maître, le passé* (1936) promoted it as a foundation myth for French Canadian *habitants*. In one of his novels, *L'Appel de la race* (*The Iron Wedge*, 1922), he dramatizes the conversion of Jules de Lantagnac from a most successful Ottawa lawyer into a political radical for the cause of the French language in Canada.

Helped by the urgings of Father Fabien, Lantagnac revisits the parish of St-Michel in the Larentians—the place of his birth that he had not seen in twenty years. As he afterwards explains:

"Just imagine, Father Fabien," the pilgrim went on ... "just imagine that I have set off through the fields, and that I revisit this landscape at the end of June, a matchless period of the year in our Quebec countryside. It is the time at which the great rejuvenation of plant life and the start of maturity overlap. The trees display their rich green foliage, thick, vigorous, swollen with sap. ... From the banks of the ditches rises the perfume of wild strawberries. Your nostrils dilate in the intoxicating air; an indefinable surge of youth and springtime flows into you, makes you throw out your chest, gives springiness to your legs, as you press forward bare-headed into the warm wind, and your feet, your poor feet sore from the hard cobblestones of the cities, almost dance on the soft grass."²

Inspired by the beauty of his country, this conversion prompts him to alienate himself from his anglophone wife and two of his four children to espouse the francophone cause which, in 1915, was threatened by the government's determination to withdraw funding from French-lan-





La Vrai nature de Bernadette



guage schools in Ontario. This determination was seen by Francophones as a betrayal of confederation which had promised equal rights for both cultures. Exaggerated as these bucolic panegyrics may seem to us now, the language issue, still present in Quebec, began with this betrayal. And even when the church had relinquished its power of conversion, the pull of the land remained.

The Pastoral Tradition

Within European civilization, the pastoral has a long history. In ancient times it conjured up images of scantily clad nymphs consorting with centaurs and unicorns. By the nineteen century, it had acquired a spiritual force. In England, we might think of the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-

1850) or the music of George Butterworth (1885-1916); while in the United States, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) spring to mind. In Canada, however, the harshness of our climate has generally introduced a sense of endurance into celebrations of the land. Nevertheless, along with a number of British-trained landscape painters, in English Canada there were the poems of Archibald Lampman (1861-1899) and in Quebec, the writings of (among others) Lionel Groulx.

During the depression-ridden 1930s, in Quebec *le retour à la terre* acquired a political incentive. A policy was instituted to transplant the urban unemployed into the northern regions of the province to farm the land. Never mind the devastation this northern wave of recolonization inflicted on native peoples, the migration took place and, well into the



1960s, was at least in part successful.

Scenes from village life appear in the documentaries of two priests Albert Tessier and Maurice Proulx who, in films such as *Hommage à notre paysannerie* (Tessier, 1938) and *En pays pittoresque* (Proulx, 1939), extol the Christian virtues of the agricultural life. Similar scenes form the backdrop for the fiction films of the 1940s and early 1950s—films such as *Un homme et son péché* (1949), *Le Curé de village* (1949), *Le Gros Bill* (1949), and, especially, *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyr* (1951).

The most famous example, however, is *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914), the novel by Louis Hémon. If Hémon was French, the first—and best—film adaptation of this work was also directed by a Frenchman, Julien Duvivier (1934). Although a French production starring Madeleine Renaud and Jean Gabin, it was shot at Lac St-Jean in northern Quebec (com-

plete with blackflies!) and, like the novel, conveys a splendid sense of the hardships of clearing the land and of the dangers entailed within so inhospitable a geography. After François Paradis, Maria's preferred suitor, goes astray in a snow storm, Maria has a choice between marrying Lorenzo and moving to the comforts of the city or accepting Eutrope and staying with the harshness of the land. She stays with the land.

In spite of its French origins, *Maria Chapdelaine* remains the classic presentation of French Canadian life of this period. And far more so than the lavish production by Gilles Carle in 1982, Duvivier's adaptation conveys both the harshness of the lives of these French Canadian settlers and the spiritual satisfaction they gain from working the land.

In québécois cinema, however, the classic exponent of the pastoral is undoubtedly Pierre Perrault. Supremely in the Île-



Entre la mer et l'eau douce

aux-Coudres trilogy, *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), *Le Règne du jour* (1966), and *Les Voitures d'eau* (1968), he less explores than celebrates the local culture of the farming and fishing community on this isolated island in the St. Lawrence River. As an ethnographic record of a vanishing way of life, these films are unique in the history of cinema.³

Equally unique is Jacques Leduc's second fictional feature, *Tendresse ordinaire* (1973). Telling the story of Jocelyn's long journey from the lumber camps near Shefferville to his home in Notre-Dame-du-Portage where his wife, Esther, waits for him during the long winter nights, the film alternates scenes of Jocelyn/Jocelyn Bérubé and his buddies on the train with scenes of Esther/Esther Auger and her friend Luce/Luce Guilbault while they bake a cake. There are also scenes of Jocelyn and Esther together—whether flashbacks or flashforwards we can't really tell.

As in the novels of Jacques Poulin—supremely in *Autumn Rounds* (*La Tournée d'Automne*, 1993)—this film takes delight in the québécois landscape and derives great pleasure from the naming of things. There is a scene in *Tendresse ordinaire* in which Jocelyn and Esther are seated on the floor, a huge map stretched out between them. Jocelyn is showing his wife the line that the train has to follow to get to his place of work, naming all the places they pass through—Tadousac, Bacon Bay, Forestville, Manicouagan, Egg Island, Sept-Îles. "Comme

c'est beau," he keeps exclaiming. "Comme c'est grand!" By the time they get to his place of destination, the map is half way up the wall as if even the map of Quebec is too large for graceful human inhabitation. "Shefferville!" he declares as the trip on the map comes to an end. Like the film in its entirety, this scene, intercut with aerial shots of a train snaking its way through the hills and forests of Quebec, is a wonderful evocation of both the beauty and the grandeur of the land.

Tendresse ordinaire is about waiting and looking, about seeing and longing. Its extremely slow pace represents an attempt to find a temporal equivalent for the vastness of the land. While many films by Jean Pierre Lefebvre touch upon the pastoral—*Mon amie Pierrette* (photographed by Leduc in 1969), *Les derniers fiançailles* (1973), *Les Fleurs sauvages* (1982)—*Tendresse ordinaire*, in spite of all the cold and snow and the absence of agriculture, in spite of the loneliness that Esther must endure, remains the purest fictional celebration of the pastoral in québécois filmmaking.⁴

Trouble in Paradise

Since the nineteenth century, the pastoral has increasingly possessed a nostalgic dimension. In Quebec, beautiful though it may seem in the works of Perrault and Leduc, it represents more an aspiration than a reality. Although part of the longing for a foundational culture for the Québécois, it refers less

to the land itself than to an *idea* of the land. From the outset there have been artists who, while still drawn to the land, could see the worm in the apple—the disruptions that were invading the rural space.

Even back in the 1950s, these disruptions were apparent. Based on a true story, *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyr* is a film about child abuse—child abuse resulting in death. Serenely set within a verdant Quebec parish not far from Quebec City, it is full of scenes that evoke the pastoral. When the abuse begins by Marie-Louise, the child's stepmother, Aurore flees outside through fields of grain, sitting by a gurgling brook, then beneath a tree with her caring brother as they pluck an apple from the tree.

Owing to the collective denial of the priest and all the villagers, nowadays the situation seems analogous to sexual abuse. Furthermore, when her father is away in the fields, Marie-Louise locks Aurore in an attic full of cobwebs and hideous spiders. This setting combined with the Hammond organ that plays throughout imbues this film with the feeling of a vampire movie. Unlike the remake of 2005, this original version of *La petite Aurore* is rich in nuance of conflicting kinds. It is one of the unknown classics of Quebec cinema—a film simultaneously pastoral and horrific.

The master of what we might call the rococo rural is Gilles Carle.⁵ Nearly all his films are set in the country, generally seen as a retreat from the city. His richest film undoubtedly remains *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1972). Starring the ebullient Micheline Lanctôt, it tells the story of a mother who, fed up with the city, retreats with her son to the country to live within the pastoral. But the life she finds there is very different from the life she imagined.

The country house she has purchased is totally dilapidated and has to be repaired. Her handsome neighbour, Thomas/Donald Pilon, runs not a chicken farm but a chicken factory. After she has agreed to service sexually three old men, she is later raped by *deux canadiens errants* with the suggestively meaningless names of St-Marc and St-Luc. When she is credited with coaxing a lame boy to walk and then to speak, she is revered as a saint.

But things go wrong. St-Marc and St-Luc seize the household with their rifles and rob Bernadette of her cash. When the crippled Rock/Reynald Bouchard tries to escape, St-Marc bounds after him across what otherwise might be a classical pastoral landscape and shoots him dead. Then old Octave/Maurice Beaupré, Thomas's father, seizes St-Marc's rifle and the recovered household chases the two "saints" off the land.

Meanwhile, Thomas has organized the farmers in protest against restrictive agricultural policies and, instead of taking their wares to market, they start throwing them onto the highway, having erected a banner on a bridge above that says "This fall, let them eat shit." Then Bernadette appears beneath the sign, now with St-Luc's rifle and, to everyone's surprise—especially the audience's!—starts shooting into the crowd.

What, indeed, is the true nature of Bernadette? With its rococo imagery of fruitful abundance in excess of rational explanation, *La vraie nature de Bernadette* creates a complex world that is connotatively rich yet ultimately absurd. Bernadette Brown is as complex and irrational as the film itself, as are, indeed, all of Carle's films in the 1970s. They



L'ange de goudron



Tendresse ordinaire

reflect the confusions of a people who have jettisoned the religious certainties of the past but who have yet to replace them with meaningful alternatives.

To a degree, the recognition of these imminent transitions were present throughout the 1960s. Even Perrault could see them coming. In his Abitibi cycle, Perrault moves north to examine the remnants of the *retour à la terre* policies of the 1930s.⁶ Most of the farmers have packed up and gone, unable to survive on the family farms of the past. Perrault's *Le Retour à la terre* (1976) intercuts harsh images of the farming life in the Abitibi region of the present with idealized images of the same territory from the films of Maurice Proulx taken back in the 1930s. This technique effectively contrasts the reality with the dream. But as the farmers leave the land, sometimes transporting their houses with them, we can recognize that the dream has come to an end.

The most poignantly ironic of the films of this period, however, is Michel Brault's *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (1968). It tells the story of Claude/Claude Gautier who leaves his village on la Côte nord to find work in Montreal, leaving behind his sister, his friends, and Manouk, his native lover. The film opens with shots of Manouk and Claude frolicking about the woods, in a state of nature, if you will, while we hear one of the songs he will compose later on:

Yesterday I jumped the rocks
On the river of the wild season. ...
Manouk, my little Indian,
Tenderly you would follow me,

And in our pagan love
There was something true.
And the river on the shore
Was not yet the sea,
And the flower between your lips
Was not yet bitter.
How happy we were
Between the ocean and the fresh waters ...

The painful irony of this film emerges from the fact that Claude becomes famous as a *chansonnier* through singing songs about a rural life he had to abandon. But more serious disruptions were soon to appear as the québécois countryside became increasingly industrialized.

The Violence of the North

When the horse-drawn sleigh gives way to the snowmobile, the ox to the tractor, the hand saw to the chain saw, then the bucolic dream of the pastoral has begun to erode. Industry has invaded agriculture. People no longer gather at the village church but hang out in the local bar-salon. And when agribusiness wipes out the subsistence farming of yesteryear, for many people the dream has become a nightmare.

Even the celebratory beauty of Gilles Carle's *L'Ange et la femme* (1977) opens with the roar of snowmobiles and machine-gun fire; and in *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* when Claude returns home for the Lenten celebrations, before he finds his sister in bed with his best friend, the three of them have careened about the countryside on snowmobiles. But



Tendresse ordinaire

the snowmobile as instrument of destruction is most powerfully employed in Denys Arcand's third feature film, *Gina* (1975).

Sometimes described as a Canadian *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Gina* interweaves the twin stories of a documentary filmmaker/ Gabriel Arcand and Gina/Céline Lomez, a professional stripper. They both travel north in the middle of winter to the small village of Louiseville—he to make a film on the exploited workers of a cotton mill, she to perform in the motel with its bar-salon.

She prefers hanging out with the filmmakers than with the snowmobile club which is based in the region. She and the assistant cameraman/Serge Thériault, even beat the ring-leader, Marcel/Jean-Pierre Saulnier and his buddy/Jocelyn Bérubé at pool, initiating their macho resentment of her. After her performance which is, indeed, provocative, the drunken snowmobilers break into her motel room and rape her. When she has recovered, she decides to take revenge.

She summons her pimp bosses from Montreal who, one evening, go after the rapacious revellers with baseball bats. Three escape and Gina herself goes after them in a car, finally edging Marcel into a highway snow-blower, shredding both him and his machine. As always with Arcand, no judgements are made. Because of the rape, we both cheer her on and yet are appalled by what she is doing. *Gina* is not a pretty picture.

In this film, there is no trace of the pastoral. Given the absence of any hint of agriculture, even the rural has disappeared. Instead we have factories and strip clubs, exploited

labourers, predominately women, and drunken voyeurs, predominantly men. We have moved a long way from the rural sense of origins celebrated in works such as *Maria Chapdelaine* or *L'Appel de la race*. There seems now no "terre" to return to. The countryside has become a wasteland—a site of barren cold and latent violence.

The most powerful recent example of the hinterland as wasteland is Denis Chouinard's second feature film, *L'Ange de Goudron* (*Tar Angel*, 2001). The film presents to us the Kasmi family—four Algerians living in Montreal, looking forward to the ceremony when they will finally gain their Canadian citizenship. The father, Ahmed/Zinedine Soualem, works as a roofer—a tar angel—and is particularly proud at the prospect of his new nationality. In an early scene, we see him trying on his specially tailored suit and practising "O Canada" in front of a mirror while his pregnant wife, Naïma/Hiyam Abbas, impatiently looks on.

The film begins, however, with a scene in a mosque in which many Muslims are chanting and praying together. And then, as if to contrast the Old with the New, the sacred with the secular, the scene that follows shows Hafid/Raba Aït Ouyahhia, Ahmed's son, and his friends kicking a soccer ball around in the snow. They invite Ahmed to join them and his face lights up at the pleasure of the game.

This contrast between the old and the new/in maintained throughout, establishing an ongoing tension obviously troubling for many new Canadians between their inherited and their adopted worlds. The plot motivator for the film concerns the social delinquency of the young Hafid.



Gina

Hafid is a computer geek who is a closet activist. One night when he breaks into an immigration office in order to vandalize some passport documents, his face is caught by a security camera. Evidently, whatever their legal status, immigrants to Canada cannot be deported if their passports are destroyed. But this act of vandalism which Ahmed learns about on television, brings his world crashing down about him.

Behaving like the authoritarian patriarch which his culture has encouraged him to be, Ahmed silences his wife and sends his daughter to her room while he rifles through Hamid's room, searching for a clue to his whereabouts. Finding a photograph of him with a young Québécoise, he sets out to find her.

Two narrative threads interweave throughout this film—the personal and the political. On the personal level, the film constitutes a kind of *Bildungsroman* for Ahmed. Determined to find his son, he has to explore the world in which his son has been living—a world totally foreign to Ahmed. Visiting the Cégep St-Laurent where Hafid has been studying computer science, he is alienated by everything he finds, not least of which is the fact that the instructor is a woman. Finally tracking down Huguette/Catherine Trudeau, the young Québécoise in the photograph, he is initially disgusted by everything he sees. She is a tattoo artist; she is an organizer of Crisco, a guerilla

theatre group; and she has obviously been sleeping with his son. At first he rejects her but eventually accepts her so that Ahmed and Huguette can travel north together.

Once the two of them set off on their journey, in the tradition of *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* and *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) *L'Ange de goudron* becomes a classic Canadian quest film. Except that this time the protagonist is not moving from an impoverished rural district, looking for a better life in the city, but venturing north into a frozen wintry wilderness, trying to find his son. In this foreign territory, Ahmed has to endure innuendoes he doesn't understand and potential violence he is unprepared for.

While filling up the gas tank of the roofing truck which he has stolen, he is greeted with the smirks of a young guy at cash who assumes that Ahmed is having an affair with Huguette. They encounter someone with a tractor-lifter, stacking logs; but there is no logging community. There is no sense anywhere of any sort of social activity, of people productively living on the land.

Their journey north becomes a journey through what many viewers might feel to be a series of improbabilities. Nevertheless, there are wonderful moments along the way. When they hunker down at La Glacière, a northern motel

which is hosting a snowmobile reunion, they share a room together much to Ahmed's discomfort. When Huguette turns on the television, she is obviously moved by seeing the *snowmobile à trois* sequence from *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* in which Claude, his sister, and his best friend are careening about through a more pastoral kind of winter landscape. Even for the activist Huguette, there is an Old and a New.

When our *voyageurs* finally manage to track down Hafid and his gang of political activists, a reconciliation begins. When Ahmed first sees his son, he takes off his cap. But they have an angry confrontation, with Hafid accusing his father of servilely accepting the established order whereas Hafid has to courage to challenge it. Later, when Hafid and Huguette are lying on a blanket together, we notice a tear in his eye. "I think I've killed him," he says, conscious of having shattered his father's Canadian ideals. When he slips away on his snowmobile to play his role in the planned activity taking place at a government airport, as if in solidarity with his fellow Muslims, he wraps a turban about his head.

The goal of this activity is to prevent a chartered flight full of illegal immigrants from taking off, to seize their passports, and to destroy them. When the police surround Hafid with the passports, he throws them into a jet engine. As the shredded scraps of paper rain down upon him like snowflakes, the police kick him to death. Although perhaps taxing our sense of the plausible, *L'Ange de Goudron* is a powerful presentation of the hopes and heartbreaks of many new Canadians. It also suggests that all is not well these days in consumerist Quebec.⁷

After the swearing-in ceremony with a discordant, bilingual singing of our national anthem during which the three remaining Kasmis are silent, the film ends with a visit to the cemetery where Hafid now is buried. Naïma has had her baby and as the four of them gather round the grave, Ahmen delivers an off-screen soliloquy of reconciliation with his son, while Huguette creeps up from behind, wanting to be part of this ritual of mourning. Although the final image consists of a close-up of Ahmen's hands, as if in supplication, we know that a part of that proud man now lies buried with his son.

Envoy

While cinematic representations enjoy a privileged relationship with the real, they are not the real. If the cultural works discussed above may help us understand the workings of the québécois imagination over the years, they are all imaginary constructs, containing simplifications, exaggerations and omissions. With the passing of time, what strikes me as extraordinary in all these films is the almost total absence of Quebec's native peoples. Although there are a few references in *Maria Chapdelaine* and occasional glimpses in Perrault's films about the north, they play no part within the ideal of the pastoral tradition. One would have to run as a short before *Tendresse ordinaire* Arthur Lamothe's exemplary *Les Bûcherons de la Manouane* (1962) to experience the harshness of the lives of lumberjacks, to hear about their low wages and the even lower wages given to the native people who cut the bits of wood considered unprofitable by white men.⁸

In this regard, *Menaud, maître-draveur/Master of the River* (1948), by Félix-Antoine Savard is worth a mention. Demonstrably the heir to *Maria Chapdelaine*, it is as much a celebration of the purity of the French Canadian race as

Groulx's *L'Appel de la race*.

Being free meant feeling the sound of the land under your feet echo the beat of your heart everywhere in the country you went; everywhere hearing the voice of the land, forest, waters, saying, "I belong to your race and I await you!" Being free meant tasting in the air what you taste when you eat the bread of your own grain. Being free meant that wherever you went your forefathers had been, recognizing something of your own face in every face, in the customs, something of your customs; it meant seeing every door open and hearing, in your own tongue, "Come in! You are at home!"⁹

In this book, Savard feels the French Canadians are under siege, with their land rights being taken over by those who are always referred to as the Strangers. However, even here there is no reference to native peoples. If the encroaching Anglophones are experienced as strangers, the encroached upon Aboriginals are not experienced at all.¹⁰

Nevertheless, perhaps because of the racial priorities of so much of the traditional québécois inheritance, there is a coherence in the culture that permits the kind of analysis attempted above. It represents a richly varied and evolving view of life which is very much the product of a distinct society—the distinct society of Quebec.

Peter Harcourt's latest publication is Jean Pierre Lefebvre—Vidéaste. He lives in Ottawa.

Notes

- 1 For a more extended analysis of this film, see "The Beginning of a Beginning," by Peter Harcourt. *Self-Portrait: essays on the Canadian and Quebec cinemas*, ed. by Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), pp.64-76
- 2 *The Iron Wedge/L'Appel de la race*, 1922, by Lionel Groulx, trans. by J.S. Wood (Ottawa: University of Carleton Press, 1986), p.13
- 3 See "Pierre Perrault and Le Cinéma vécu," by Peter Harcourt. *Take Two*, ed. by Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), pp.125-135; and "The Île-aux-Coudres Cycle" in *Pierre Perrault and the Poetic Documentary*, by David Clandfield. (Toronto International Film Festival, 2004), pp.13-36
- 4 Jacques Leduc also shot the pastoral ending of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, as if Denys Arcand, who refuses the pastoral, nevertheless wished to acknowledge that tradition.
- 5 For early essays on the achievement of Gilles Carle, see "Gilles Carle—A Thematic Response," by Piers Handling. *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson. (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), pp.199-207; and "The Sins of Gilles Carle," by James Leach. *Take Two*, pp.160-168
- 6 See "The Abitibi Cycle" in *Pierre Perrault and the Poetic Documentary*, pp.69-93
- 7 The improbabilities in this film are the result of displacements and condensations. For instance, the Quebec government does not reserve a northern airport for the shipping out of illegal immigrants but a comparable situation occurred a few years earlier in British Columbia. Similarly, although political activists have certainly been killed while in the hands of the police, probably not in so brutal and public a manner.
- 8 Between 1973 and 1983, Arthur Lamothe, French by birth, produced a twelve-part series on the lives of the First Nations in North-Eastern Quebec, a unique exploration of the lives of the native peoples within québécois cinema.
- 9 *Master of the River/Menaud, maître-draveur* [1937/1948], by Félix-Antoine Savard, trans. by Richard Howard. (Montreal: Harvest House, 1976), p. 112
- 10 For an early acknowledgement of the racism implicit in the Québécois' celebration of their ethnic identity, see "Some Ideological and Thematic Aspects of the Quebec Cinema," by Michel Houle. In *Self Portrait—Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*.

Anxieties of Fundamentalism and the Dynamics of Modernist Resistance

YOUSSEF CHAHINE'S *AL MASEER (THE DESTINY)*

BY MALEK KHOURI

Introduction

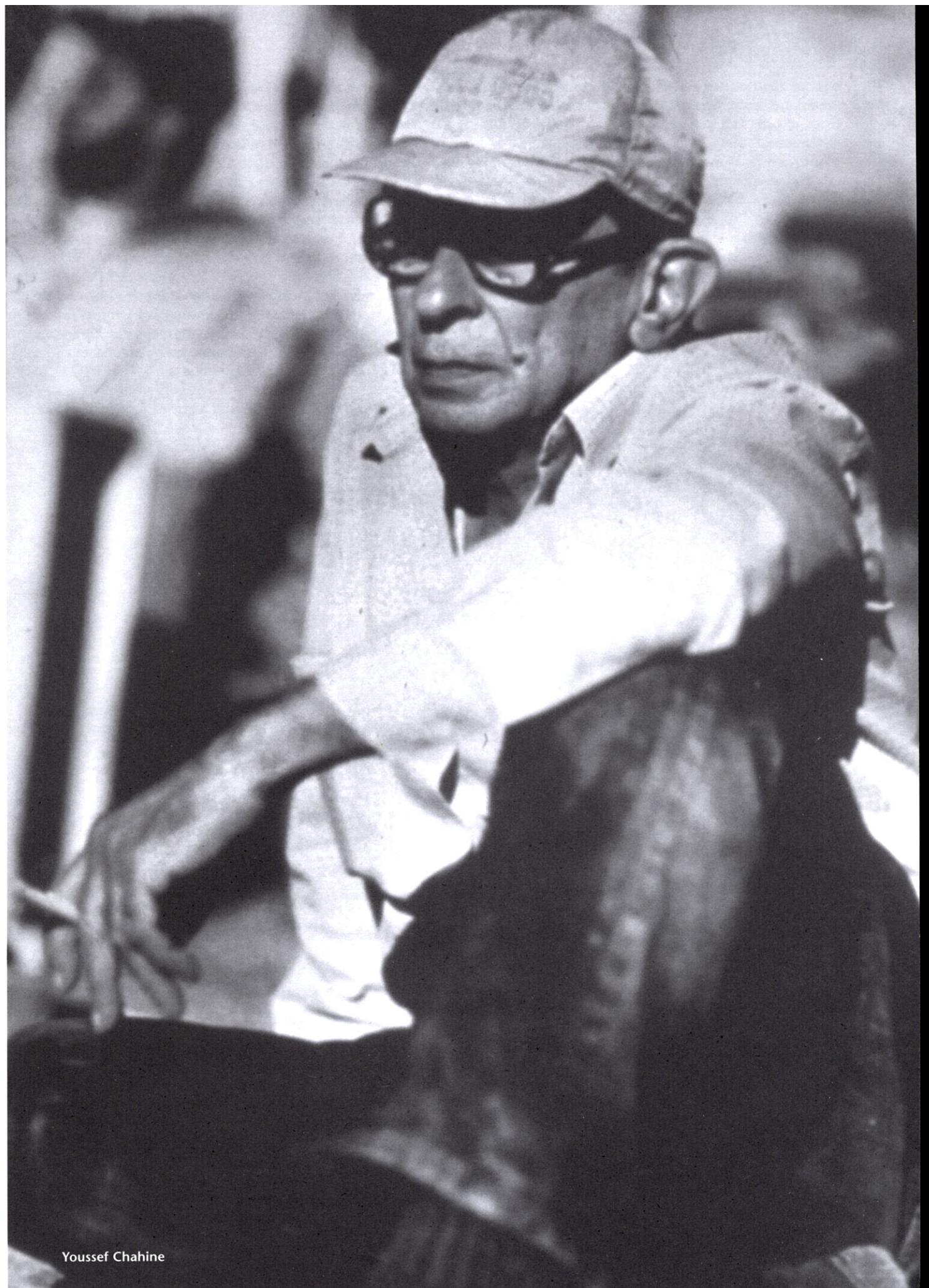
In this article I provide an assessment of Youssef Chahine's 1997 film *Al Maseer* (The Destiny).¹ The film was awarded the 50th Palme D'or Anniversary Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in the same year, and eventually became one of Chahine's better-known and probably most popular films outside of the Arab world. *Al Maseer* tackles various issues relating to religious dogmatism, and sketches out underlying elements in this phenomenon's rise in the Arab world since the mid 1980s. The film loosely interprets events that took place in 12th century Arab Andalusia, and as such it functions as a piece of history in the sense that it depicts a historical setting where an Arab cosmopolitan culture spanning across cities such as Baghdad, Fez, Damascus and the Spanish cities of Cordoba and Grenada made them centers of economic expansion, scientific progress and philosophical and cultural innovation. The film is also a piece of history in that it uses a moment in Arab and Muslim history (and inadvertently European history) to weigh on current political and ideological developments and issues. As it tackles contemporary anxieties associated with the rise of religious fundamentalism, *Al Maseer* provides a 'modernist' strategy that presumes an active experiencing subject/audience in and through whom it (the film) becomes memory and history.

The film presents a story of struggle against religious fundamentalism through the subject-consciousness of a famed Arab philosopher. The historical Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was an astronomer, medical scientist, religious interpreter (Fakih) and above all a philosopher who lived between 1123 and 1198 AD and later became one of the main sources of atheist thinking during the European Renaissance. As a materialist thinker, Ibn Rushd translated Aristotle and contributed to the emergence of an evolutionary interpretation of the notion of

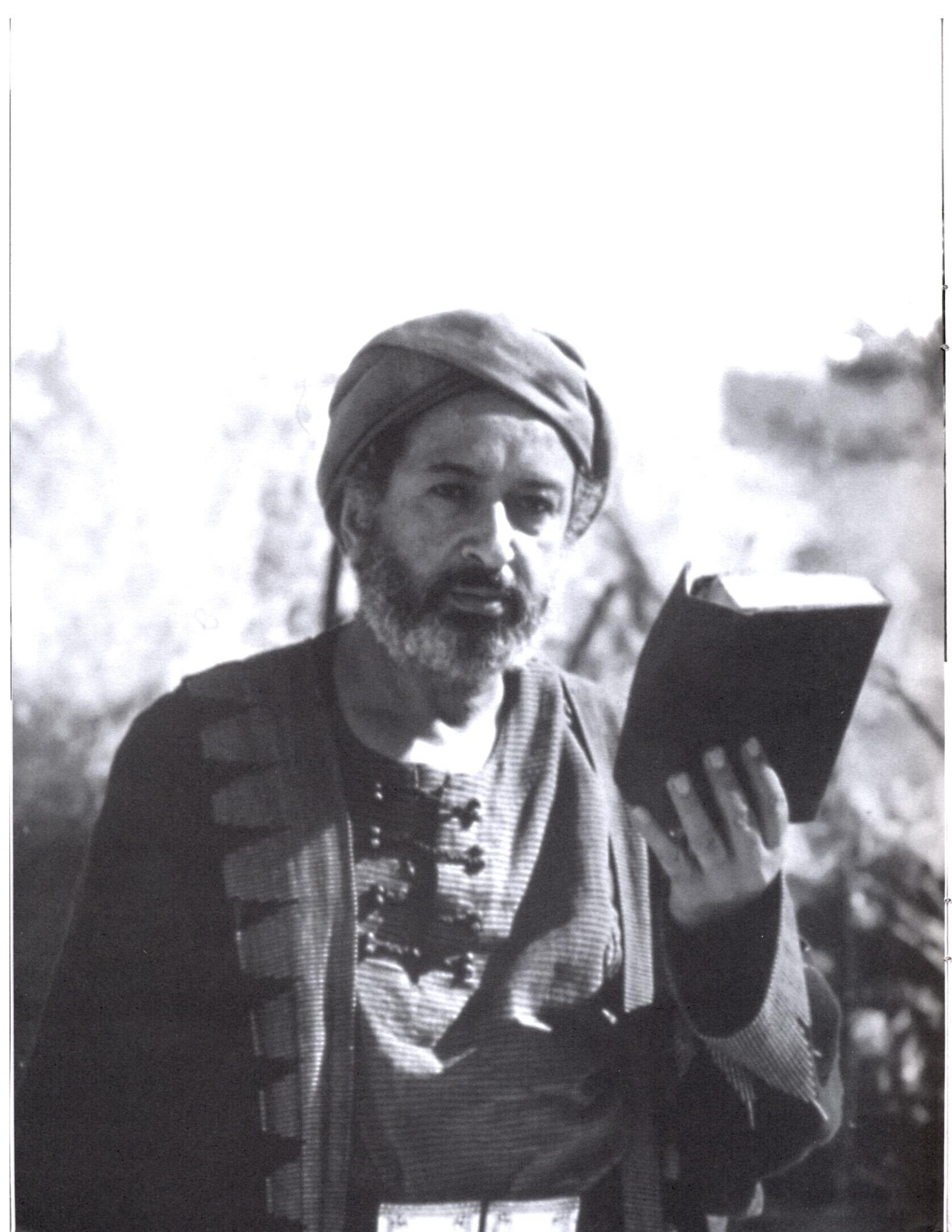
creation. In his treatise titled *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, a polemic against a book by al-Ghazali, a theologian and defender of religious dogma, titled *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ibn Rushd professed the eternity of the world, implying the existence of uncreated matter, and affirmed the primacy of reason over faith. The philosopher was later exiled to the North African desert and his books were burned. His followers were condemned and persecuted in Europe during the Inquisition.² For an audience that is unfamiliar with Arab culture and history the film brings to light references that have been long absented by 'Orientalist' discourse on Arabs and the Arab world. As such Chahine's film counteracts perceptions that allege a long-standing historical clash between, on the one hand, a Western civilization that is beacon of secular and rational discourse and, on the other, an Arab/Muslim culture that is inherently irrational, fanatical, violent and anti-progress.

This essay describes the film's estimation of the fight against religious dogmatism in the Arab world as integral to an anti-colonial struggle for liberation, national self-determination and modernization; it also highlights the film's modernist structural and formal strategies. On the one hand, the essay's utilization of the term 'modernity' integrates an outlook toward lived experience that encompasses various political, ideological, and cultural paradigms. My use of the term 'modernization', on the other hand, refers more specifically to the processes of change that result from the introduction of certain technologies, such as the technology of cinema itself, into the various spheres of private and social life. My employment of both terms, however, also considers the specificity of their use in the context of Arab history, philosophy and culture.

By offering an 'Other's', a post-colonial—and in this case a



Youssef Chahine



specifically Arab post-colonial—perspective on ‘modernity’, my approach naturally poses a challenge to the ‘universal’ (read, colonial) use of the notion of ‘modernity’. Furthermore, this approach proposes an alternative to what Edward Said once described as “corporate institution of dealing with the Orient”³ as it pertains to Western scholarship on Arab culture and ultimately on Arab cinema. Therefore my reading of *Al Maseer* submits some crucial and often disregarded theoretical and methodological considerations for those pursuing further research on Arab and Egyptian cinemas as well as post-colonial film texts in general.⁴

This essay also gives prominence to discussing broad historical and cultural attributes relating to the film. These elements are imperative for understanding *Al Maseer*’s signifying codes and its ideological connotations as they pertain to Arab audiences. While this methodological approach remains, in my view, critical for reading any film, I contend that it is even more necessary in discussing a film like *Al Maseer*. In light of this film’s heavy reliance on references that, for the most part, are not readily accessible for all non-Arab audiences/readers, some elaboration on historical and cultural issues becomes of paramount analytical relevance.

The essay first discusses the film’s significance as commentary on post-colonial struggle against religious fundamentalism. Here the essay traces the rise of Islamic fundamentalist influence in Egypt and the Arab world in the 1990s, then draws attention to how the film represents the struggle against fundamentalism as integral to the struggle against colonial and neo-colonial hegemony in the Arab world. The article then offers an analysis of the film’s modernist outlook and strategy. First I introduce the cultural continuum through which the struggle against religious fundamentalism in Arab history was construed via a modernist symbiosis, and how this struggle associated modernization and modernity with the struggle for national unity and self-determination. Here I draw connections between the philosophical/religious propositions set forth by the main protagonist in the film, the historical figure of Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd, and their subsequent revival in the 1800s through the rise of the Arab Renaissance Movement (al-Nahda) and into 20th century’s anti-colonial struggles. The essay then goes on to discuss how the film’s thematic emphasis on combating contemporary religious fundamentalism is matched by a ‘modernist’ estimation of the nature and significance of the historical text itself. In this context I demonstrate the film’s exploration of modernist meanings through its articulation of a modernist plot structure and cinematic text.

a) The film within the historical context of rising religious fundamentalism

Upon its release in 1997, *Al Maseer* swiftly became symptomatic of the challenges faced at the time by Arab intellectuals in light of the rising influence of Islamic fundamentalist groups in their region throughout the mid 1980s and 1990s. After years of extensive United States’ logistical and financial backing for the fundamentalist ‘Mujahidin’ groups in Afghanistan and other areas, Islamic fundamentalists in the late 1980s were acquiring wide influence on the grass roots level in Egypt as well in several other Arab and Muslim coun-

tries. Within this atmosphere, Egyptian intellectuals such as Nasr Abou Zeid (persecuted for his ‘blasphemous’ interpretation of the Koran), Nawal Saadawi (a feminist who targeted the issue of female circumcision) and Naguib Mahfouz (the Nobel laureate who explored aspects of working class life in Egypt) along with numerous others, became victims of scare mongering and direct attacks by religious fanatics who were promoting dogmatic agendas.

However, Islamic fundamentalists were not able to assassinate Faraj Fawdah, a radical liberal intellectual and a lifelong campaigner against obscurantism and fanaticism, until 1992. Similarly, writer Naguib Mahfouz—for a period of over 50 years—grappled with God and wrote passionately about prostitutes and homosexuals, and celebrated working class sexual promiscuity while expressing disdain for middle and upper class hypocritical Puritanism. Yet fundamentalist groups had never made an attempt on his life until 1994, when he was eighty-two years old. Clearly, the government’s discount of the rising danger of such groups allowed them to proclaim themselves as guardians of ‘morality’ in the country. Succumbing to pressure from religious groups, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture allowed the head of al-Azhar, Egypt’s central religious authority and censor, a free hand to deal with “blatantly sexual and offensive books and cultural products”.⁵ Condemning fundamentalist “intellectual terrorism” Mahfouz himself issued a furious statement, declaring: “The censor in Egypt is no longer just the state. It’s the gun of the fundamentalists.” Eventually, the witch-hunt against writers and artists as well as other sections of the population intensified throughout Egypt and spilled over its borders to the rest of the Arab world.

From Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and Yemen to the Gulf Sheikdoms, Arab intellectuals were being assailed and hunted by religious zealots for ‘disseminating blasphemy’. The Yemeni writer Abd al-Karim al-Razihi was forced to seek asylum in Holland; legal charges were launched against the Kuwaiti women writers Layla al-Uthman and Afaf Shu’ab as well as against Jordanian poet Musa Hawamidah; in Algeria, Wasinin al-A’rag’s novel, *The Hostess*, was banned for impiety, and several Rai musicians were assassinated and targeted as advocates of sexual impropriety and godless communism. Back in the Arab east, Lebanese popular musician Marcel Khalifeh was being charged with blasphemy for a song which he adapted from a piece by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darweesh.

The situation had direct effect on intellectual and cultural life in Egypt including its film industry and production. Filmmaker Youssef Chahine himself was not immune from the fallout of this charged atmosphere. In 1994 Chahine was taken to court over his 1994 film *Al Mouhager* (The Exiled). A fundamentalist lawyer charged that the film presented the prophet Joseph and that according to Islam and to al-Azhar religious rulings it is forbidden to show prophets on the screen. The lawyer wanted the court to pull out the film from Egyptian movie theatres and to stop its distribution outside of Egypt. The court battle lasted over six months and the film was eventually forced out of movie theatres, but not before becoming the highest box office grossing Chahine film to date. Initiating the production of *Al Maseer* less than one and half years later denoted the filmmaker’s own commitment to facing up to the challenges created by these events.

b) The film as a statement against religious fundamentalism

The film ventures back into 12th century Spanish Andalusia to explore the story of the philosopher who is also appointed by the Caliph as the Grand Judge of Cordoba. Andalusia's Caliph (al-Mansour) has two sons: (al-Nasser) a follower of the philosopher Ibn Rushd, and (Abdallah), a party animal who is decoyed into the camp of fundamentalists. Political schemes are rampant in the area. The Caliph supports Ibn Rushd, but is opposed by an Islamic fundamentalist cult that hopes to overthrow him and to get rid of the "heretic" philosopher. Meanwhile, the oldest son is concealing a forbidden love with Manuela, a gypsy, and his trusted adviser is working both sides of the street. A clandestine project is set in motion where a group of Ibn Rushd's disciples who study his books decide to copy them by hand and send them to a safer place, in case the tide turns and the books are burned.

The film's plot structure points out religious fundamentalism as a trend that encourages intellectual regression, and one that, at its core, benefits powers seeking to curtail the struggle for national independence, unity, heterogeneity and the drive towards social and political progress and emancipation, as well as fundamental human freedoms. *Al Maseer* is constructed in a largely accessible linear fashion. The film's lucid plot progression represents a relative departure from the filmmaker's complex use of flashbacks and dream sequences in many of his other films. As the film opens, a follower of Ibn Rushd in France is being burned at the stake, the bonfire fed by his writings and his translations of the philosopher's books. The smoldering man calls out to his son Joseph to seek out Ibn Rushd (ironically, the name Joseph, Youssef in Arabic, is identical to Chahine's own first name, who himself, like the film's Joseph, also happens to be of an Arab Christian background). The scene sets in motion a story about the cross-cultural and cross-historical phenomenon known today as religious fundamentalism. The trajectory between the first and the last scenes of the film where we witness the burning of Ibn Rushd's books in Andalusia carries particular resonance for present day viewers. Together, the two scenes enhance the film's critique of religious dogmatism as a cross-cultural phenomenon.

Ibn Rushd himself is portrayed as part of an open and pleasant intellectual and artistic community living in a predominantly free-thinking atmosphere. The depiction of Ibn Rushd's character—his enlightened philosophical vision, his intellectual openness and his playful yet politically engaged lifestyle—is highlighted by the film's plot which pits, on the one hand, the philosopher's determination to move across a range of religious, ethnic, gender and cultural boundaries against, on the other hand, religious fundamentalism's self-inflicted imprisonment within controlled, secretive and prohibitive structures and politics. Presenting an attentive portrayal of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious 12th century Arab Andalusia the film draws attention to the dangers facing today's heterogeneous Arab national society and identity.⁶

Furthermore, Chahine's celebratory delineation of an Andalusian carefree life-style accentuates his emphasis on the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism as an antithesis to social progress, intellectual freedom and the aptitude to celebrate life's blissful pleasures. In many respects the plot of the film is consistently intermitted by scenes depicting all kinds

of earthly sacrileges that fundamentalists loathe! For example, much of the dramatic events in the film are set against backgrounds of exuberant dance, music, poetry, humour, sex, romance and captivating and colourful landscapes, architecture and costumes.

Romantic sub-plots enhance the film's emphasis on social and intellectual heterogeneity and on combating dogmatic interpretation of religion. Stories depicting relationships between Abdallah and Sarah, Manuella's younger sister, and between An-Nasser and Salma, Ibn Rushd's daughter to whom Joseph—the son of the executed Christian philosopher—also has an attraction, all enhance the film's main thematic preoccupations. While Abdallah and Sarah's relationship is interrupted by the young man's involvement with the fundamentalists, the second affair concludes in Salma's marriage to the Caliph's eldest son and Ibn Rushd's own disciple, an-Nasser.

The linearity of the plot compounded with its dependence on the general familiarity of its Arab audience target with the history of the conflict between Ibn Rushd and the fundamentalists—as well as with the contemporary situation in the Arab world—infers a clear political statement in support of progressive change and against the rise of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism in the Arab world and beyond. As it traces the philosopher's story *Al Maseer* reclaims aspects of Arab history by way of describing a continuous struggle between reactionary forces and proponents of intellectual enlightenment and social progress. The film posits history as an arena of exploration and recovery of collective identity; this history is offered as memory and as an informant for understanding and addressing present dilemmas.

c) The film as a story about the challenges facing Arab unity

Al Maseer inadvertently makes reference to two critical components of Arab and Egyptian post-colonial politics, both of which allude to the role of colonial powers in combating the pan-Arab project for national self-determination by their encouragement of religious sectarianisms within the Arab region. The first relates to the centrality of the notion of Arab identity, which the film depicts as a heterogeneous entity, and the second deals with the relationship between fundamentalist politics and colonial political manipulations.

Historically the movement advocating pan-Arab unity reflected the goal of a democratic unification and national self-determination of Arab speaking peoples. Contrary to what 'Orientalist' discourses customarily suggest, Arab nationalism has been largely associated with advocating national identity as a socially and politically heterogeneous alternative to religious, ethnic and tribal divisions.⁷ The early movement for Arab unity also epitomized an initial phases in the anti-colonial struggle for national self-determination and unity when much of the Arab world, particularly east of the Mediterranean, was still under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Between 1831 and 1840 Egyptian ruler Mohammad Ali and his son Ibrahim made the first attempt to create a larger united Arab state in modern history, which in addition to Egypt included greater Syria (comprising present day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and Jordan). The campaign was

eventually crushed after a joint political and military campaign was initiated by the Ottoman Empire in alliance with Imperial Britain and the tacit approval of other European colonial powers at the time. But despite its failure, Mohammad Ali's attempt enhanced an intellectual and political maturation of the struggle for Arab unity, independence and modernization.

The first effort to create a united Arab state reflected in its essence the rising role and influence of an emerging national bourgeoisie against old feudal structures. The ideological character of the reform demands by this emerging class echoed in multiple ways those raised by the European bourgeoisie as it began to affirm its own power during the European Renaissance and as it finally affirmed its reforms after the French Revolution. In the Arab world a similar movement was on the ascendance by the 1800s. This movement was later termed al-Nahda al-Arabiah (the 'Arab Renaissance' in English). Since its emergence in the mid 1800s the al-Nahda movement informed and was informed by a strong emphasis on social and cultural heterogeneity as integral to achieving self-determination and national independence.⁸ Later, the social and political composition of 20th century modern pan-Arab movement consistently involved the active and leading participation by

individuals from a wide cross-section of the region's ethnic and religious mosaic, and unswervingly advocated secular forms of government.⁹

Al Maseer's attentive celebration of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and politically pluralist Arab society in 12th century Spain is conducive to pan-Arab political reclamation of heterogeneity as a defining character of Arab identity. In other words the film puts a great weight on depicting the struggle against religious fundamentalism also as a struggle for reviving a heterogeneous Arab identity and unity. It is within this breadth that the film also recognizes the polity of religious fundamentalism in the context of externally induced colonial politics in the region.

The plot of the film explicitly alludes to the role played by European leaders in fomenting support for fundamentalist sects in Arab occupied Spain. In this context the role played by European kings is portrayed as an affront for their pre-Renaissance medieval hostility towards what Andalusia's Muslim/Arab culture largely symbolized at the time (i.e., cultural and national heterogeneity, scientific progress and intellectual freedom and openness). As such the film allegorically refers to the 'colonial'¹⁰ politics of divide and conquer as exemplified here in its collaboration with Islamic fundamentalism; inad-



vertently the film envisages how Arab struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism has been consistently informed by the struggle for modernist renewal. Today, emphasizing this modernization/national liberation dynamic remains part of how most prominent Arab modernist intellectuals challenge the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a politically and ideologically regressive movement.¹¹

d) The notion of Modernity within an Arab cultural and cinematic continuum

Within its own specific historical and cultural parameters Arab intellectual articulation of modernity acknowledges a paradoxical disposition of a project which is not dissimilar to how 'modernity' was articulated within, for example, a Latin American context, as "neither a break from the past nor a new way of describing and categorizing the present; [but] instead [as a re-articulation of] the process whereby historical and cultural formation mediate and condition contemporaneity" to quote Zuzana Pick.¹² Modernity as a specifically Arab frame of reference equally finds its origins within an intellectual and political paradigm (which was at its height in the mid to late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries) that was part of an anti-colonial project which also sought progressive political, economic and cultural renewal.

As I noted earlier, the al-Nahda movement epitomized the struggle to reaffirm Arab identity and sought ways to assert Arab rights for national self-determination. Equally as important, Arab intellectuals in the 1900s aspired for a transformation that involved a 'cross-fertilization' and integration of Muslim and Arab heritage with the humanist traditions of the European Renaissance, the ideals of the French Revolution, and 19th century scientific and industrial Enlightenment. As such al-Nahda saw itself primarily as a 'modernist' and 'modernizing' movement combining various political, social and philosophical features.¹³

Al Maseer reincorporates modernity and the struggle for modernist renewal in the Arab world into the struggle against religious fundamentalism. In this regard the film reaffirms a long-standing Arab approximation of the notion of modernity. However, to understand the significance of the film as a modernist text, it is important to give a brief overview of the development of modernism as an artistic Arab endeavor.

Chahine's selection of the story of Ibn Rushd as the subject of his film bears direct relevance to how the notion of modernity in Arab societies is conceived within a specific political, social and philosophical/religious continuum. In the film Ibn Rushd the philosopher is quoted directly from one of his comments on the relationship between philosophy and religion:

Wisdom guides the virtuous theologian in his study of what we call "syllogism". And divine law guides the philosopher in his study of what we call "reason". Reason is the study of wisdom. Everything that has been deduced from divine law is subject to interpretation. Reason is the sister of divine law. The supposed conflict between them is a malicious invention.

Religious Muslim Arab intellectuals of the mid-19th century such as al-Afghani, Mohammad Abdo and Abdel-Rahman al-Kawakibi consistently stressed the need to overcome barriers between Islam and philosophy that initially emerged after the burning of the books of none-other than Cordoba's philosopher Ibn Rushd. These intellectuals emphasized the need to break away from traditional dogmatic reading of the Koran and embraced openness in interpreting religious texts. In essence, this group of al-Nahda theologians sought to rejuvenate and modernize the process of inferring the religious text in a way which—as Ibn Rushd himself described over seven centuries earlier—, respected the primacy of reason, fought intellectual and religious mysticism, and by extension promoted philosophical rationalism as well as scientific modernization and social progress.¹⁴ Discussions around the interpretation of the religious text soon expanded to include wider and even more vigorous debates around breaking away from the sanctification of language and written texts in general. What ensued was a movement which put a specifically Arab spin on the notion of 'modernity'.

After centuries of intellectual stagnation (Joumoud) under the Ottoman rule, Arab intellectuals provided the thrust for a wide literary and artistic body of work that promoted renewal (Tajdid) of critical and literary practices. By the 1920s, and later during the period of the struggle for national liberation in the 1940s and 50s, a movement involving intellectuals and artists from a cross-section of anti-colonial, socialist and left-liberal trends and groups began to introduce and incorporate various aspects of early 20th century western modernist movement in the arts and literature. However, Arab modernity also strongly emphasized the dynamic recovery and reexamination of Arab and Muslim history, literature and language; the development of classical Arabic language to make it more reflective of the realities of contemporary life, arts, literature and sciences; and third, developing contemporary Arab literature and arts by deepening their social relevance and celebrating their connections and interactions with the wider heritage of humanity as whole.¹⁵ As a result of this confluence between local and external intellectual and political trends and orientations many Arab artists began to see themselves and their role in society as integral to the process of recuperating a cross-historical, cross-cultural, cross-textual and determinedly political struggle for renewal. As such, the acknowledgement of the polity of the text constituted the essence of defining Arab modernity.

As we have seen earlier, discussions on the interpretation of the religious text during the early period of al-Nahda later expanded to include a call to break away from traditional sanctification of language and its use in literary and artistic work. In the late 19th century a broad cultural cluster of writers and artists began to advocate renewal (Tajdeed) of critical discourse by way of challenging and overcoming centuries of social and intellectual stagnation (Joumoud) under the colonial rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶

With the collapse of the Ottoman rule after World War I and its replacement with Western colonial powers, new alignments of anti-colonial forces began to emerge. In the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s the anti-colonial movement in the Arab world comprised forces whose outlook was more open than ever to western politics and cultural discourse. For example

liberal, socialist and Marxist ideas increasingly asserted their presence among Arab intellectuals, ushering in the process a closer examination of the new artistic and cultural trends there were emerging at the time in Europe (including in the former Soviet Union).¹⁷ Such re-alignments constituted the nucleus for a nuanced 'modernist' cultural discourse. Basing itself on al-Nahda's philosophical push for opening the use and interpretation of language and religious texts (rather than the closing them to stagnant forms, conventions or authority structures) and its political challenge to colonial hegemony as well as social reaction and conservatism, Arab adaptation of a 'modernist' text increasingly became synonymous on the one hand with its stylistic heterogeneity and diversity and on the other with its conscious awareness of the polity of the artistic text.

Since its early beginnings in the 1920s and throughout its development during the last century Egyptian and Arab cinema has reinvented itself by simultaneously incorporating various stylistic and generic approaches. All through its history Egyptian cinema has sustained a concomitant interest in various cinematic traditions including those of classical Hollywood and the avant-garde, as well as popular and high art both on the production as well as the circulation and consumption levels.¹⁸ Up until today and despite occasional setbacks, Egyptian film (as part of a nationally based, controlled and operated studio system) largely maintained broad popular appeal among its national audience.¹⁹

Western cinematic modernist impulses—originating in early and mid 20th century western art and literature—were assimilated by Egyptian filmmakers as equally valuable and complementary rather than antithetical to Arab national and cultural modernist traditions. Adaptation of western versions of modernism by these filmmakers was partly re-fashioned via their own indigenous modernist traditions and history.

Following Gamal Abdel-Nasser's left-nationalist revolution the public sector in Egypt began to play a major role in supporting a socially and politically dedicated, modernist, 'Third Worldist' cinema.²⁰ By the early 1950s Egyptian cinema was integrating a loose adaptation of various realist cinematic trends including French poetic realism, Italian neo-realism and socialist realism.²¹ It was also incorporating a mixture of approaches associated with Soviet dialectical formalism particularly those articulated by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, as well as various expressionistic techniques and innovations introduced by classical German filmmakers of the 1920s.²²

The interest in a wide range of 'modernist' trends was rearticulated through a symbiosis of themes and to the background of local settings and experiences. Chahine's 1958 film *Cairo Station* for example reflected this symbiosis in its simultaneous incorporation of techniques used by neo-realists, German expressionists, Eisenstein's editing techniques and the French new wave, all while maintaining a fundamentally classical Hollywood plot structure. Building upon their own national modernist paradigm, many Arab filmmakers consistently recuperated a cross-historical, cross-cultural, cross-textual and an inherently and determinedly political cinematic project.

As a post-colonial text, *Al Maseer* explores Arab modernist meanings not only through content, but equally through a reciprocal articulation of the textual mode itself. In such text, as Russel McDougall suggests, "[the] interest is in the attitude

of the image, the strategies of the narrative, the placing of the reader, and the cultural coding those aesthetic principles that inform the whole process of fiction."²³ The film's thematic accent on combating religious fundamentalism is juxtaposed with a 'modernist' re-articulation of the cinematic text.

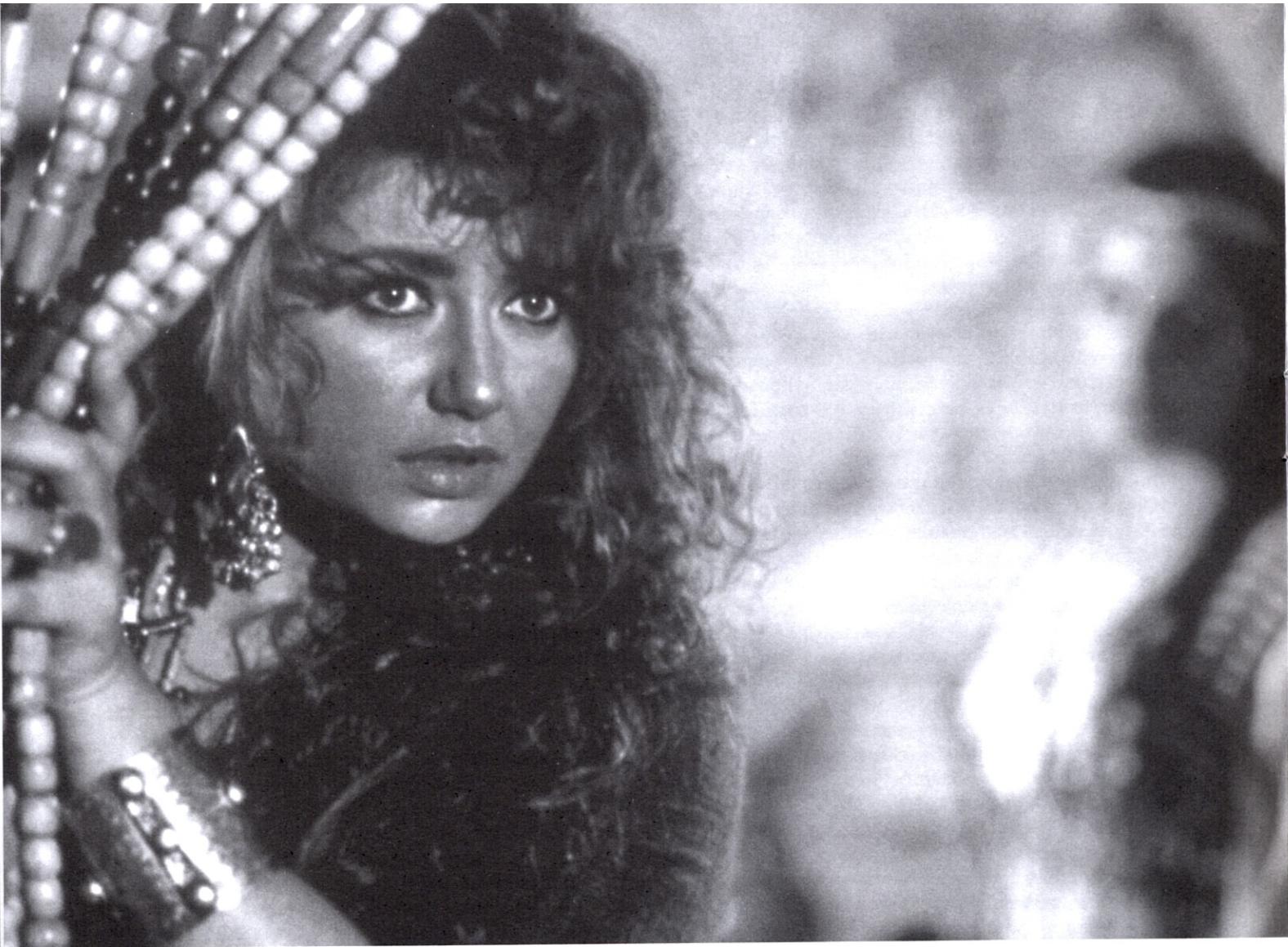
e) Modernist Impulses in *Al Maseer's* Stylistic Strategies

Chahine's film freely utilizes several generic and stylistic conventions in a way that delineates its challenge for the sanctification of history and its embodiment within the artistic text. By employing a pattern that has been intrinsic to Arab filmmaking practices since the late 1920s, *Al Maseer* works stylistically with and against an assortment of representational conventions. The dynamics of the struggle against fundamentalism in 12th century Andalusia assume multi-temporal and cross-spatial political significance, one which infers current growth of religious fundamentalisms of all denominations and throughout the world. These thoughts are of course inferred within the theme of the film and its political relevancy to contemporary audience, but they are also capsule within extensive moments of cinema.

The film makes effective use of several classical stylistic techniques, avoiding, for the most part, the use of hand held camera, natural lighting or violating the rules of continuity editing. However, and as it articulates the chronicles of conflict between political reaction and progress, the film operates across a complex paradigm of representational systems.

Generically, *Al Maseer* assumes the appearance of a historical epic, but it is also largely constructed as a passionate melodrama that in turn incorporates all the conventions of a musical genre film. The film also brings together music and dance tableaus that transcend the specificity of 12th century Andalusia and simultaneously incorporate contemporary, multi-ethnic and multi-religious references. In the process, *Al Maseer* breaks down multiple artificial barriers—of form, geography, 'high' and 'low' art, performer and artist—that are so often used to delineate cinematic cultural practices in the West. This allows the film to effectively reach out to a wide audience with a message of urgent relevance not only to regional but also to world politics. Therefore the film is construed within an elaborate system of multi-temporal affectivity and cross-fertilization of various generic conventions and cultural signifiers. But this is a multiplicity presented in a qualitatively different fashion from the one associated with post-modernist textual 'play'.

In her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire" Linda Hutcheon specifically points out the distinctiveness of the political agendas of the post-modern and the post-colonial. She denotes that while the first concerns itself with deconstructing orthodoxies, the latter prioritizes social and political action. As such, post-modern strategies are ineffective in bridging this gap, and they rest within the sphere of deconstruction.²⁴ In contrast, multi-temporality and the cross-fertilization of various generic, stylistic and cultural conventions and signifiers as used by Chahine are offered as political commentary on the static reading of history and of the historical text, and on the need for using history to understand and respond to today's struggles and dilemmas. To achieve this, the film relies heavily on music and dance tableaus to



enhance narrative and thematic lucidity.

At times the narrative seems to unfold in-between a series of dance and music sequences that almost appear superfluous to the development of the plot. These sequences inhabit a conceptual space which helps ascertain the political preoccupations of the film. Music culture in Andalusia after the 8th century witnessed major and at the time some unique developments; this included the creation of the world's first known music schools (the Zuriab school) to which students from across the Muslim world and Europe flocked to study music theory and history and to learn singing and playing instruments.²⁵ Here the film utilizes historical and cultural references to mediate and ultimately provide political annotation on modern day struggles, particularly against contemporary fundamentalist claims that music and dancing are incompatible with Islamic or Arab traditions and culture. As such the film also reaffirms the on-going conflict between dogmatic traditionalism and dynamic incorporation of modernist in Arab as well as human history in general.

Al Maseer also draws on a coalescence of oral story telling, poetry recital, music and dancing as long-standing traditions in Arab history. In post-colonial texts, such performative

practices emerge "as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity."²⁶ By depicting various aspects of cultural performance—ones that have also played key roles in the development and popularization of Arab cinema itself and in the shaping of its national identity²⁷—*Al Maseer* reiterates its allusion to the modernist continuum in Arab history. As he combines Arab, Spanish, gypsy, flamenco, old and contemporary music and dance formats in at least three sequences within the film Chahine rearticulates for its contemporary audience a historically heterogeneous Arab culture. As such, the body performance becomes a cultural signifier, which, in the tradition of the post-colonial text "stands metonymically for all the 'visible' signs of difference, and their varied forms of cultural and social inscription."²⁸

By using multi-ethnic references, the film's embellished song and dance sequences also render body performance as an act of defiance and resistance which transcends cultural boundaries. For example, the forceful and self-assured gestures associated with flamenco dancing reiterate the film's preoccupation with bliss and pleasure as antithetical to fundamentalist repression. But the reference here is clearly not to the dominant Andalusian Arab dance form of the period

(known as al-Samah), but is rather to one that, at the time, was emerging within a coalescence of Spanish, Arab as well as Gypsy dance traditions. As such, the film's celebration of cultural heterogeneity is enhanced by the choices made in building the filmic text itself and its use as means for commenting on the politics of contention between fundamentalism and modernism.

The film also employs iconographic patterns of costume, architecture and landscapes to create a rendition of its thematic dialectic. These patterns initiate a rather subjective, multi-layered and decentred re-articulation of history. By carefully choosing his visual and cultural references, Chahine challenges classical 'realist' conventions that largely convey an illusion of a closed universe, which, as J. Paech would suggest, becomes a 'panopticon' in which reality and fiction are rendered as one.²⁹

For its part, *Al Maseer*'s extravagant and colorful mise-en-scene and its highly coded imagery work against the dark and insidious plot. As such the film puts forward references that subvert widely held static conceptions vis-à-vis Arab and Moslem societies and cultures. The film's representation of life in Arab Andalusia elects landscapes, costumes, architectural exteriors and interiors that, as signifiers, destabilize dominant Western imaging (as well as fundamentalist a-historic nostalgia for a misconstrued past) of an Arab "Orient" characterized by dusty deserts, clay architecture and women covered in black from head to toe. Such images are contrasted with the film's depiction of an Arab landscape out of a green mountainous Mediterranean (the film is mainly shot in Syria and Lebanon) which is almost identical with the Andalusian setting. The interiors of Andalusia's houses, palaces and alleyways are richly decorated and markedly nuanced with a variety of red, rose, pistachio and apricot colors in addition to a wide range of purple, ruby red and blue shades.

The film's excessive emphasis on the colorfulness of the set functions beyond the necessity of plot structuring and historical accuracy; it provides for a modernist challenge to classical realist cinematic tradition which heavily relies on the dominance of the plot which subordinates all other stylistic elements including the mise-en-scene. On the one hand, this textual exposé actually bestows credibility on the film's historical setting and provides it with an ostensibly authentic feel. On the other hand, the careful construction of the mise-en-scene largely contrasts and defies the dark and menacing plot and draws attention to itself (i.e., the mise-en-scene) as an embodiment of resistance against the political scheming by the fundamentalists in the film as they attempt to impose their dark intellectual uniformity.

On another level, the film emphasizes other spatial and signifying patterns that claim our attention in their own right. Visual representation here consistently re-envision images and episodes by mediating them as the point of view of a bewildered spectator who is being challenged to reassess his/her perspective. From the outset, the stipulation of the film as a commentary on Islamic fundamentalism is subverted by an episode depicting the burning at the stake of a follower of Ibn Rushd in medieval France.

As we gaze at the gruesome execution of the man, Chahine's camera steers our view from one corner to the other as our eyes wander about a Christian medieval cathe-

dral. Lingering close-ups scrutinize the cathedral's architectural exterior, the deafening silence and heaviness of its gargantuan medieval stones, its statues and its crosses, and the army of Catholic clergy and priests accompanied by their henchmen to perform the violent execution. 'But this is not supposed to be about the Christian west', our wit alerts us! Yet, as we are forced to re-adjust our perceptual gawk to accommodate this unanticipated dislocation of the object of our gaze, we realize that we are being set up to challenge and question our own ideological preconceptions pertaining to the nature of religious fundamentalism, its history, its players and its victims.

But fundamentalist revival in Arab society remains the film's main preoccupation. To the musical rendition of al-Thikr (a old ceremonial religious custom), an ominous re-enactment of Abdallah's fate after he decides to join the fundamentalist sect is played as our eyes follow the camera's creation of a visual trail (this is the only hand held camera shot in the entire film) that delves forward into the dark and narrow path underneath an old castle. The camera leads us to where the young man and the rest of the group are holding one of their secret rituals. The camera's own stumbling and menacing movement fuels a sense of anxiety and apprehension, one which Chahine brilliantly uses to reflect upon the world of religious fundamentalism.

The film also allows us a glimpse of the actual leader of the fundamentalist sect, al-Amir (the Prince), a man who surrounds himself with hallow of sanctity and power. This 'prince' "appears" once a year and this advent is accompanied by full-scale celebration impeccably choreographed to reaffirm the myth about his super-human angelic stature and to stress his religious piety in the eyes of his followers. One of the Amir's supporters proclaims: "al-Amir "commands knowledge of everything, and is able to see and interpret the past, the present and the future." Our first glimpse of the man presents him dressed in a white robe, riding a white horse and his head and beard cleanly shaven. Another of his followers informs that the Amir's diet consists only of a single date per day! In the eyes of his cohorts this neo-nazi look-alike is an angel of some sort! Worth noting here is that this sequence introduces us to the leader of the fundamentalist group through a compelling interpretation of the power of iconography as it informs and is informed by the manipulation of subaltern masses' 'common sense philosophy', and how this manipulation ultimately enhances their submission to hegemonic ideology. Allusion to visual and cultural signifiers of purity and disdain for life's pleasures, associated with the Amir's white robe and horse along with the reference to his dietary abstention (fasting), demonstrates how symbolisms of long standing cultural and religious relevance enhance hegemonic consensus.

The film also refers to how the notions of Arab modernity and modernization represent historical challenges to fundamentalist dogma. In one scene we take pleasure in watching an intriguing and detailed delineation of one of the great Arab contributions to sciences. We look in amazement at a fascinating invention, an early telescope that works by using the magnifying power of water. Ibn Rushd and his assistant Marwan look through the device to monitor the activities of the fundamentalist sect in their military training in an old

castle. The scene assumes important allegorical significance. Similar to how the cinematic camera emerged over a hundred years ago, the telescope more than seven centuries earlier also assumed a symbolic modernizing significance. The telescope allows Marwan—and us in the process—a clearer viewpoint of the actual training activities conducted by the fundamentalists in an isolated castle. Marwan's mediated gaze allegorically alerts us to the need for vigilance in responding to sectarian and dogmatic politics of all sorts. The film here symbolically accentuates the centrality of Arab modernity and modernization as part of the transformational endeavor for progressive social, political and national unity and self-determination. It also self-reflexively emphasizes Chahine's own interest in the process by which critical examination and analysis of certain phenomena can be enhanced (i.e., through political utilization of modern and modernizing tools such as cinema).

The film also deliberately juxtaposes images and sounds of young people singing, dancing, reciting poetry, drinking and making love against images and sounds of fundamentalists expressing their detestation for "life's material pleasures." As I mentioned earlier, the film's soundtrack includes reference to the religious practice of al-Thikr which the sect uses to recite verses deplored life's "joys as well as its sorrows." Through the song, members of the religious sect express their reliance on faith to help them "accept what has been already determined for them" and to remain content while they await the inevitability of death. In contrast, Marwan's songs expressly call on people to celebrate life.

The primary phrase in Marwan's first song in the film includes an appeal to 'life lovers' to reaffirm their defiance against attempts to silence their music and to prevent them from indulging in what life offers. It also calls on people to "raise their voice as they sing" by way of expressing their resistance to all forms of repression and terror (it is important to note here that the first attack on Marwan in which he is stabbed in the neck bears identical resemblance to how fundamentalists attacked Nobel laureate writer Naguib Mahfouz just a couple years before the making of the film). The song is repeated twice in the film, first as part of a musical dance tableau and the second in eulogy to Marwan after he dies during the second attack on his life. In both cases, singing takes on symbolic significance as an expression of resistance against terror, violence and dogmatic interpretation of religion.

Another important element in the film is its use of contemporary colloquial Egyptian rather than classical Arabic dialect. Traditionally in Arab cinema, classical Arabic is the dialect that is exclusively used in historical epics. Chahine's use of Egyptian colloquial Arabic in this historically inspired film represents a unique break in Arab film practice. On the one hand, the dialect reflects Chahine's interest in an oral text which is accessible and reflective of the popularity of Egyptian cinema as pan-Arab cinema. Equally as important, on the ideological level this also represents a break from the monopoly of presenting history through the mediation of high and inadvertently sanctified text (i.e., through classical Arabic).

The free use of popular Egyptian dialect for the film's dialogue as well as its songs (in a similar fashion to how other textual signifiers such as dance are used in the film), breaks with a traditional outlook on classical Arabic as the only means by which history can be transmitted and addressed. In

this context the film once again asserts its modernist approach, this time by emphasizing the role and function of language as a dynamic signifier of history. This is of particular importance considering how classical Arabic is customarily appreciated for its mythical qualities which, as Viola Shafik suggests, reduces it to "a transmitter of divine revelation" based on its use in the Koran which itself "marks in every respect, politically as well as culturally, the beginning of Arab Muslim culture."³⁰

Through their attempts to invoke a different use of the Arabic language, writers of al-Nahda "contributed to the separation of language from the context of religion and paved the way for its use as a basis of national, non-confessional identity."³¹ These Arab modernists consistently attempted to revolutionize the use of the Arabic language as a dynamic tool for social and cultural communication as well as harbinger to address and analyze history and to contemplate lessons for future social and political struggles. Therefore in addition to allowing for a less pretentious and more reflexive articulation of history, Chahine's use of more popular and popularized tools to address his subject denotes continuity in the endeavor initiated in mid 19th and early 20th centuries by Arab modernists. Just as *Al Maseer* deliberately uses a free visual and cultural articulation of 12th century Andalusian setting, it also juxtaposes contemporary colloquial Arabic 'against' the official history of the period and draws from this disparity an entirely new, synthesizing function of words, sketching from this dialectic a renovation so basic it would be alphabetic.

Conclusion

By foregrounding a rich and dialectically charged rendering of historical and cultural references, artifices and practices, Chahine forges an inter-textuality which links the past, the present and the possibilities for future change: a sort of cultural memory which in the words of Jesus Martin Barbero has the capacity to exceed the "cumulative user-value function; [one which] is processual and productive, it filters, charges and empowers shaping a dialectic permanence and change, resistance and exchange."³²

Chahine's film draws attention to itself as a cry against the sanctification of history and the historical text; it challenges preconceptions of this text as static, beyond reproach and as an arena with little or no relevance to the presence. Rather than approaching it as nostalgia, *Al Maseer*'s representation of a crucial moment in Arab history stipulates this moment with a vigorous exploration of the dynamics of oral and visual representation of collective memory. As such, resistance against religious fundamentalism is rendered synonymous with post-colonial struggle for national unity, self-determination and economic, social and political progress.

The name and image of Ibn Rushd becomes an epithet, but also assumes the stature of a signal of history. The 12th century philosopher becomes a chunk of history, in that it shows the transformation of a people and a space during a critical period in Arab collective memory. But Ibn Rushd also signals the childhood of Arab culture—its dynamism violently interrupted by the hegemony of colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as its submission to its own political and religious regression and terror.

Malek Khouri is associate professor of Film Studies at the University of Calgary. Khouri is currently working on a book on Chahine which concentrates on the counter-hegemonic significance of his work in the context of Arab and post-colonial resistance.

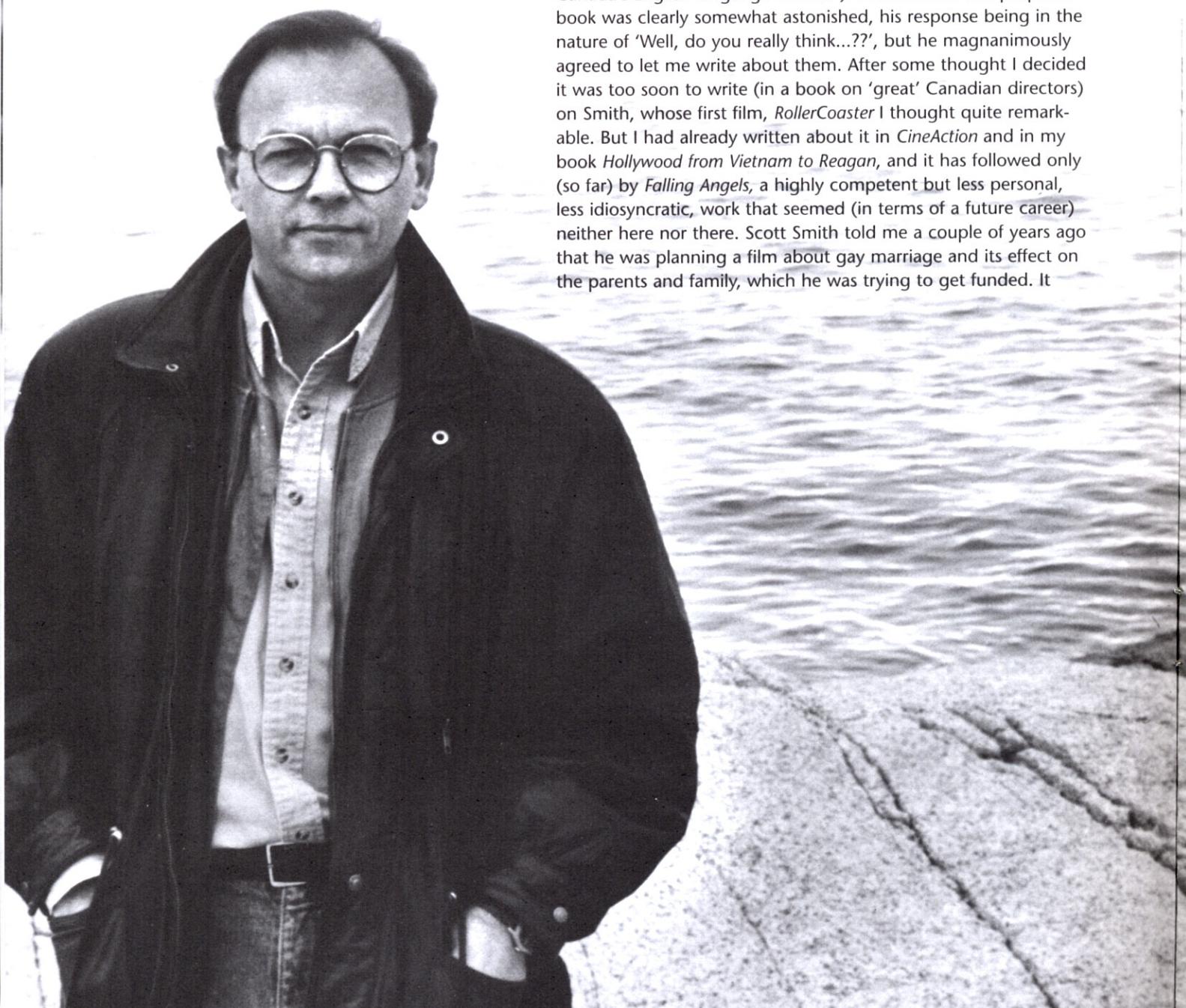
Notes

- 1 This essay is part of a comprehensive study on modernism and anti-colonial resistance in Youssef Chahine's cinema.
- 2 To elaborate on philosophical inquiry in Andalusia in general and in relation to Ibn Rushd's contributions in particular consult Miguel Cruz Hernandez's "Islamic Thought in the Iberian Peninsula" and Jamal al-din al-Alawi, "The Philosophy of Ibn Rushd" in S. Jayyusi *Legacy of Muslim Spain*, pp 777-803 and pp 804-829.
- 3 Edward Said, "Orientalism" in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 88.
- 4 Historically, Arab cinema has been relegated to the margins of film studies scholarship. New interest in Arab cinema however is manifest in activities within film and media studies' circles. Examples of this include the creation of the Middle East Caucus in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and the relatively more frequent presentation of studies on Arab cinemas within academic conferences in Canada and the United States. Articles, interviews and reviews and casual references to Arab films are now found in film trade-magazines and journals such as *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, *Cinema Journal*, *CineAction*, *Cineaste*, *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film, Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Screen*, *Sight and Sound* among others. Over the last fifteen years several anthologies, monographs and books variously dealing with Arab cinema were published by Ghassoub (2000), Dikelman (1999), Darwish (1998), Shafik (1998), Zuhur (1998), Arasoughly (1996), Armbrust (1996) and Malkmus and Armes (1991), among others. Worthy of specific mention is Ella Shohat's work on Third World and Israeli cinemas most of which inadvertently offers a major contribution to understanding the dynamics of Arab film practice and to critiquing Western readings of 'third world' cultures in general.
- 5 For a detailed account of the role of the Egyptian government in strengthening the ideological grip of Islamic fundamentalists in the areas of culture in the 1980s and early 90s and its effect on Egyptian cinema, see Zyad Fayed's (in Arabic) *Revolution in Egyptian Cinema* (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Society, 1999), 85-102.
- 6 Many of Chahine's films, including all his historical epics such as *Saladin*, *Adieu Bonaparte!* make allegorical reference to the heterogeneity of Arab culture and pan-Arabism as hybrid, multi-religious and multi-ethnic project.
- 7 Contemporary pan-Arabism first took shape in the Arab east (mainly Syria and Lebanon) in the mid 19th century and later in Egypt and gradually assumed the stature of a heterogeneous movement with one of its main political goals being the struggle for reforming the 400 year old Ottoman rule over the Arab world. This movement rejected what it conceived to be a medieval despotic and conservative hegemony by the Ottoman Empire. Consequently and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I the struggle for Arab unity and independence became the hallmark of resistance against carving the Arab world into separate colonial areas between England, France and Italy (in the case of Libya and Somalia). This movement played a critical role in the mobilization against colonial hegemony and exploitation; it also allowed Arabs over most of the last century to continue to seek eliminating the much-dreaded legacy of the colonial creation of several mini 'national' states in the region. It also offered means for ushering a renewed sense of a pan-Arab national identity.
- 8 From a cultural perspective, the pan-Arab project may be seen by some as somewhat problematic because it brings together diverse populations with various cultural and historical specificities (of which the problematic exclusion by some Arab nationalists of African, Kurdish and Berber minority populations, for example, cannot be overlooked). However, the fact remains that a substantial number of the movement's intellectual and political leaders largely came from a cross-section of the region's diverse religious and ethnic minorities including many from Christian, Jewish and Kurdish backgrounds.
- 9 Irrespective of their varied approaches and political agendas, almost all major influential pan-Arab nationalist parties in the second part of the 20th century advocated a secular approach to governance. In fact, most founders of these movements and groups came from religious and ethnic minorities in the region; this includes three Christians, Michael Aflak (the Baath Party), George Habash (The Movement of Arab Nationalists) and Antoun Saadi (the Syrian Social National Party), not to mention the theoretical father of modern day Arab nationalism, Costantine Zureik. Marxists of pan-Arab persuasions included Lebanese Christian (Farajallah Al-Hilou) and legendary Kurdish Syrian communist leader Khaled Bakhsh.
- 10 There is no consensus when it comes to characterizing the nature of Arab presence in Spain for over 400 years (i.e., whether this presence can be conceived as colonial or as 'liberatory'). What is important here is to stress the dynamics by which Arab audiences perceive this presence, and consequently how Chahine himself utilized this perception to present a narrative about the colonial role in fomenting divisions among Arabs.
- 11 See Adonis, "To Mohammad Jaber Al-Ansari: A Call for the Declaration of a Historical-Intellectual Manifesto," trans., *Al Hayat*, no.14731 (July 24, 2003): 15.
- 12 Zuzana Pick, "The Politics of Modernity in Latin America: Memory, Nostalgia and Desire in *Barroco*," *CineAction*, 34 (1994): 43
- 13 For an excellent account of the rise of the Arab Renaissance Movement see Albert Hourani's *History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 299-372.
- 14 For a more comprehensive look at the interaction between Arab modernity, renewal of religious interpretation of the Koran, and 19th century Arab Renaissance movement see Maher Al-Sharif (in Arabic) "How the End of the Movement for Religious Renewal Contributed to Jeopardizing Arab Renaissance Projects" in *At-Tarik*, 1 (January – February 2002): 6-27.
- 15 Mohammad Khalaf-Allah Ahmad (in Arabic), *Markers on the Road towards Modernist Arabic Clasicism* (Cairo: League of Arab States, 1977) 5.
- 16 By the early 1900s even traditional critical interpretations of classical literary Arabic texts, including those of the pre-Islamic period (al-Jahiliyah), came under fierce scrutiny opening the way for a vigorous discussion on the historicity and the interpretive value of language and text. A major development in this regard was the publication of Egyptian writer Taha Hussein's groundbreaking book *On the Jahili Literature*. Other major literary figures and social and cultural reformists who contributed to this re-evaluation process during the same period included Gibran Khalil Gibran, Jirgi Zaydan, Ameen Al-Rihani, Qassem Amine, among others.
- 17 For example, most leading Arab literary and arts journals between the 1920s to the 1960s were initiated by and included contributions by intellectuals who were loosely or closely allied to various socialist oriented movements and groups. Journals such as *Al-Hilal*, *Al-Thaqafah*, *Al-Risalah*, *Al-Kateb Al-Masri*, *Al-Makshouf*, *Al-Aarfan*, *Al-Thaqafah Al-Jadidah*, *Al-Tarik*, etc., were the first to publish material by intellectuals who played a major role in the rejuvenation of modernist Arab literature. Leading writers such as Salama Mousa, Jirgi Zaydan, Taha Hussein, and later Naguib Mahfouz, Omar Fakhoury, Maroun Abboud, Tawfik Youssef Awwad, were among those who saw their first writings published in journals such as the ones mentioned above. On its 60th anniversary, a leading Arabic cultural/journal *Al-Tarik* published a special issue, which mapped out the history of these journals and their significance on Arab cultural history (January-February 2002): 227-277.
- 18 An example of the openness to the concomitant development of Egyptian cinema relates, for instance, to how the social realist movement, which reaffirmed its presence after the 1952 Revolution against the monarchy, coexisted with and fed upon the success of the generic and stylistic conventions of classical Hollywood cinema that were widely adopted by local filmmakers since the early days of Egyptian cinema. In the late 1960s and early 1970s classical Hollywood stylistic strategies effectively coexisted with an emerging popular interest in neo-realism and to a lesser extent with various avant-garde film movements.
- 19 In a recent research trip to Cairo I was pleasantly surprised to discover that, in any given week, Egyptian made films constituted a minimum of 70-80 percent of the films screened in movie theatres across the city. This in a country where the government, in the interest of maintaining good relations with the World Bank and the government of the United States, has essentially abandoned all remnants of support for its national cinema both on the levels of production and of distribution.
- 20 See Ella Shohat's article "Post-Third Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema," in M. Jacqui Alexander, ed., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge 1996).
- 21 Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University Press, 1998) 126.
- 22 Salah Abou-Seif's 1953 film *Raya Wa Skina* is a classic early example of an effective integration of social realism, Soviet montage techniques and German expressionist traditions in one film.
- 23 See Russel McDougall, "The Body as Cultural Signifier," in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffith and H. Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 336.
- 24 Linda Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout of Empire," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 130
- 25 Among the few studies to be published in English on Arab music and its impact on world music history is Henry George Farmer's *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence* (New York: B. Blom, 1971).
- 26 See Helen Gilbert, "Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 345
- 27 See Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema, History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1998), 101-120.
- 28 See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 321.
- 29 See Joachim Paech, *Literature and Film* (Stuttgart, 1988): 79.
- 30 Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema, History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1998): 82.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Jesus Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony. From the Media to Mediations*, translated by Elizabeth Fox and Robert White (London: SAGE Publications, 1993): 148.

On William D. MacGillivray

BY ROBIN WOOD

The following article was commissioned for a book on Canadian cinema, or more specifically on a number (I believe it was well over twenty) of 'great' Canadian film directors, many of whom I had never heard of. When I was asked what directors I would like to write about, I replied immediately 'William MacGillivray and Scott Smith', neither of whom were included in the list I was sent. (I should confess at once that I am not sufficiently familiar with Quebecois cinema, of which we see so little in Toronto, to have the confidence of an opinion, and future references to 'Canadian cinema' in this article should be taken as referring only to Canada's English language cinema). The editor of the proposed book was clearly somewhat astonished, his response being in the nature of 'Well, do you really think...??', but he magnanimously agreed to let me write about them. After some thought I decided it was too soon to write (in a book on 'great' Canadian directors) on Smith, whose first film, *RollerCoaster* I thought quite remarkable. But I had already written about it in *CineAction* and in my book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, and it has followed only (so far) by *Falling Angels*, a highly competent but less personal, less idiosyncratic, work that seemed (in terms of a future career) neither here nor there. Scott Smith told me a couple of years ago that he was planning a film about gay marriage and its effect on the parents and family, which he was trying to get funded. It



'IF WE LOSE THE PAST, WE LOSE THE FUTURE'

sounded fascinating, but it has never materialized, and I have heard no word about him since. That left me with MacGillivray, What follows is what I wrote for the anthology. The editor (having submitted it, apparently, to some academic editorial board and asked for their advice) sent me an 'edited' version which cut a considerable number of pages. By mutual agreement I withdrew from the enterprise, and MacGillivray will not make an appearance among the 'great' Canadian directors celebrated in the book which, as far as I know, has still to appear (or have I missed something?). MacGillivray is the only Canadian film director whom I would confidently call 'great', and that on the strength of only two feature films, neither of which is widely known, neither of which has received anything approaching the recognition it deserves. If Ingmar Bergman was Canadian we would probably never have heard of him and he would have made only his first two feature films. In my opinion MacGillivray's *Life Classes* is a finer film than anything Bergman made prior to *Smiles of a Summer Night*. English Canada will never have a cinema we can be proud of until authentic talent is recognized, encouraged and funded.

What follows is the original article as it would have appeared in the anthology. I have merely added one or two footnotes.

Notes on Nationalism: A Dissenting View

"Is that what you're supposed to give us—'American' criticism?" Vendemer asked, with dismay in his expressive, ironic face. "Take care, take care, or it will be more American than critical, and then where will you be?"

—Henry James, *Collaboration*, Complete Tales, Vol.8.

My position in this volume may be something of an anomaly: unlike most (perhaps all) of the other contributors I have no particular interest in, or commitment to, Canadian cinema, despite the fact that I have lived in Canada for almost thirty years. Neither (I hasten to add) have I any particular interest in British cinema, despite the fact that I was born and brought up in England and spent most of the first forty years of my life there. In fact, though I like living in Canada well enough, I have no nationalist feelings for it or for Britain (to which I feel no impulse nowadays to return, and no nostalgia whatever). I feel a certain antagonism to all forms of nationalism, even the least harmful. I see no reason why I should take an interest in Canadian cinema any more than in, say, Hungarian or Egyptian cinema. A critic must turn his attention to where the life is, and currently it seems to be in Asia and Iran. I retain my lifelong commitment to Classical Hollywood and to much European cinema (especially French), but feel little but antagonism to the Hollywood of today. All of which means that I may view Canadian films from a somewhat different perspective than that found elsewhere in the present book. I watch and evaluate the films purely as films, not as specifically *Canadian* films. We should strive to think of ourselves as members of the human race, not of a particular country (even if we live in one). It is of course valid to note national *characteristics*, but these are of no evaluative usefulness. The one aspect of nationalism that is of obvious and crucial importance to a country's art has nothing to do with 'my country right or wrong'. It's the existence (or not) of a rich and flourishing national cultural tradition. It's easy to see how this sustained, for example, Ozu, Mizoguchi and Renoir, and even Hawks and Ford; it's precisely what Canada lacks, and the lack accounts for the thinness, the lack of resonance, of so much Canadian cinema. And it's not something you can *will* into being, it has to grow organically through the centuries.

My lack of specific commitment to Canadian film also means that there are many Canadian films (including some that are highly valued) which I haven't seen (confronted with 'World Cinema' one can't see everything). I have, however, seen sufficient to know which filmmakers I myself value highly, a very short list in which the one considered here is the most prominent. This valuation will be considered by many (including the book's editors)

William D. Macgillivray

extremely eccentric: when I was invited to contribute, I learnt that MacGillivray was not on the list of suggested entries, and when I announced that he was the director I wanted to write about the news was received with a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm. I believe that, without my perseverance, he would not have been included in this volume.

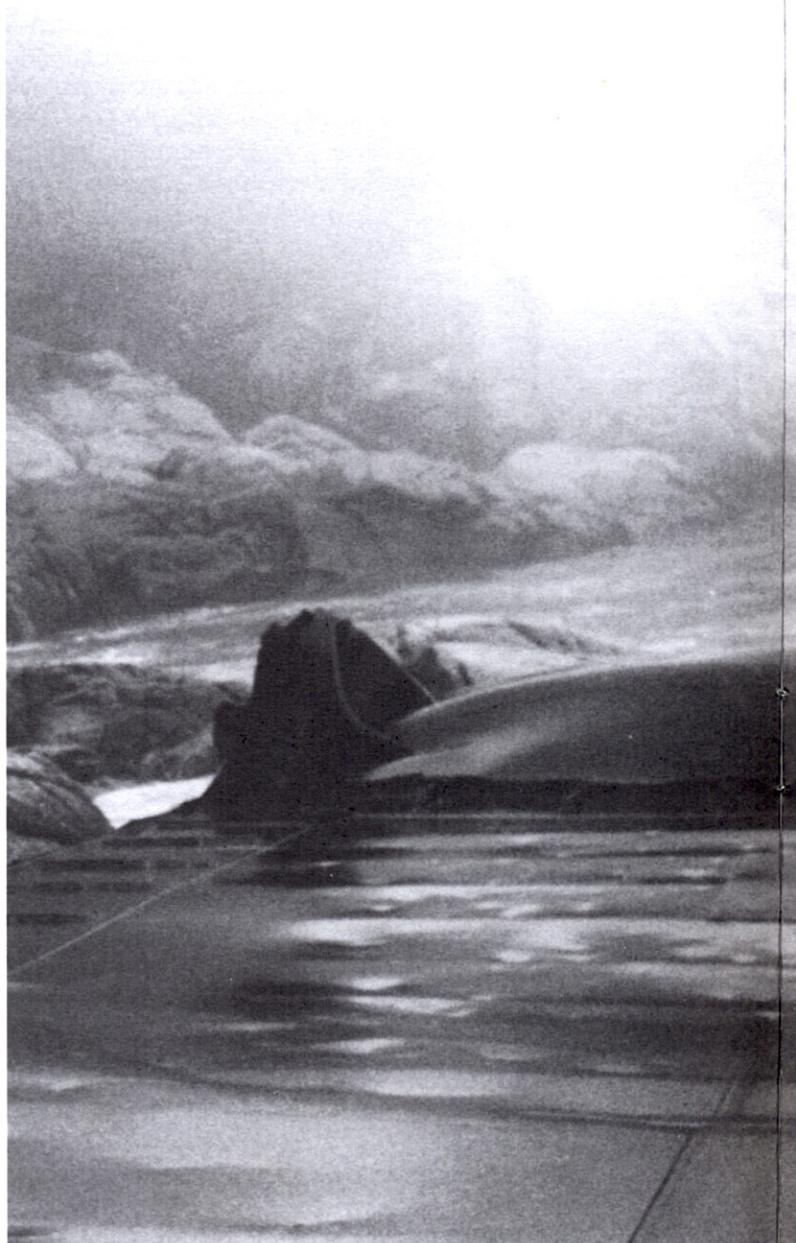
The great literary critic F. R. Leavis, who continues to be my major touchstone and reference point despite the fact that in many respects I have moved away from him over the years, held as one of his principles that great art is characterized by being 'intelligent about life—a formula so vague as to appear, in isolation, quite unhelpful. Leavis refused, when challenged, to define precisely what he meant by the phrase: it couldn't, in fact, be defined, because 'life' itself is constantly in flux, its imperatives shifting and changing in relation to constantly evolving cultural conditions. One implication, however, emerges clearly from his critical writings (in my opinion essential reading for anyone who takes criticism seriously): the great artist is concerned, whether consciously or not, with the construction and exploration of positive values. This fundamental concept has been variously and often wilfully misconstrued: reduced to absurd formulas like 'Every novel should have a happy ending' so that it can be easily disposed of. So let it be said at once that, as practised by Leavis, it is in no way incompatible with even the most tragic and/or pessimistic work. The great artist is concerned with the eternal (though continuously evolving) questions of What do people live for? What *should* they live for? What *might* they live for? I am in complete agreement with Leavis here. Where we part company is in his dismissal of everything that does not constitute 'great' art from consideration, as all art can be of interest as a product of the culture: no one, I hope, would describe Cronenberg's films (at least the early ones—*Spider* is a work of genuine distinction) as being 'intelligent about life' in the sense I have described, but they are very interesting as symptoms of cultural sickness, and the same could be said for far worse films than those. But evaluation must surely be the critic's top priority, questions of value taking precedence over the study of symptoms.

Leavis never revealed any interest in film, and the complexity of the medium, the number of contributors (director, writer, star, cameraperson...), make it difficult to apply the practice and beliefs of a literary critic to it directly. But surely what is fundamentally important in a film is where it takes the responsive viewer, emotionally, intellectually, morally, in its movement from image to image, sequence to sequence, beginning to closure. One can of course talk of 'wonderful acting', 'brilliant *mise-en-scene*', superb editing, etc., but these are all subservient to what the film actually *does*, which must never be reduced to anything as simplistic as 'teaching us lessons'.

MacGillivray's films are 'intelligent about life' on many levels; I consider *Life Classes* the finest Canadian film I have seen. I would compare him (if at all) to Kiarostami rather than to any other Canadian director, although I would be hard pressed to find any *direct* correspondences.

To demonstrate my interest in Canadian cinema (which will also expose my limitations), I offer here a very perfunctory overview of a few directors I have followed, albeit somewhat spasmodically. They are obvious ones, and include no Québécois filmmakers, of whose work I am, I admit, culpably

ignorant. I was thrilled by Anne Wheeler's first film, *Loyalties*, and wrote on it at some length: a domestic melodrama which would do credit to Douglas Sirk. It was followed by *Bye, Bye Blues*, a decent, sensitive little film. Most recently I have seen *Better Than Chocolate*, a shameless feel-good crowd-pleaser partially redeemed by an amazing performance by Peter Outerbridge but certainly by nothing else. What happened? Deepa Mehta's films are admirable in their messages but never very memorable as *films*. I admire her courage and continue to follow her work¹. I have loathed the early films of Cronenberg intensely ('intelligent about life'??—they view it with little but fascinated disgust) and I stopped seeing them some time ago. But *Spider* has certainly given me pause (it demands a great deal of careful reflection) and I greatly look forward, at time of writing, to *A History of Violence*². And of course there is Atom Egoyan, English Canada's solitary serious *auteur*. I have been diligently collecting all Egoyan's films on



DVD for several years. I am in a strange position here: I feel great respect for them, but they don't, so far, excite or move me deeply. Perhaps, so long as the films are intellectually stimulating, one shouldn't demand this—but so are Macgillyvray's films, and I find his intensely moving as well. It is clear that Egoyan is a distinguished and distinctive filmmaker, and I hope later to explore his work seriously.

Two younger talents have emerged in recent years, Gary Burns and Scott Smith. Their careers so far show interesting parallels: both have made early films about teenagers (*Kitchen Party* and *rollercoaster* respectively), which can be seen as correctives to the American teen comedies (*American Pie*, etc., etc...) that have achieved so much popularity, their tone predominantly bitter and angry against the complacent bawdiness of their American counterparts. In both cases they have followed these with a more expensive, more obviously prestigious, but altogether less disturbing, film (respectively *way-*

downtown and *Falling Angels*. *rollercoaster* in particular seems to me a work of great promise, remarkably fresh, original, surprising, compassionate. And *Falling Angels*, though far less challenging, has an engaging freshness and decidedly improves on the Barbara Gowdy novel, avoiding Gowdy's irritating, pervasive need to express a supercilious superiority to her characters. One has great hopes for Smith's future.

Note: I have written at length about both *Life Classes* and *rollercoaster*, and both essays are not only still available but in duplicate: they were first published in *CineAction* magazine (issues 17 and 57 respectively), then reprinted, with minor alterations, in my books (*Life Classes in Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, *Rollercoaster in Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*, as an adjunct to the essay on American teen comedies). As these are easily accessible I have tried as far as possible to avoid repetition here.

Aerial View





Life Classes

MacGILLIVRAY: THE FILMS

Aerial View. The Present

Of MacGillivray's early films (fiction and documentary) I single out *Aerial View*, partly because it's a perfect small (but in its implications enormous) work, very simple and unpretentious in character (like all his films), yet (like all his films) complex in significance, but more because it lays out very clearly the basic thematic of the films to come. The film is just under an hour long; its protagonist, Geoff, is a partner in an architectural firm, with a wife and a young son. The film traces his growing awareness of the inevitable corruption of capitalism, money values infiltrating, poisoning, then gradually taking over, all other values. He becomes

increasingly alienated—from his partner (who is ready to approve the most vulgar demands of their clients) and from his wife (who just wants to live comfortably and securely and can't see what the fuss is about). We see him addressing a sixth form as guest speaker, denouncing the new Civic Centre as money-making for the capitalists, no thought for the people; he wants to make housing units for families, using 'local labour and local skills that are appropriate to our environment or our climate. It's as simple as that'. This prompts what we take as a 'typical' question from his school audience, a hopeful 'How much money do you guys make?' whereupon, reduced to silence, he walks out. Similarly, he walks out of a meeting with his partner and a wealthy prospective client who requires an Anne Hathaway country

cottage with a two-car garage ('What a crock of bullshit'). Increasingly uncompromising, he visits his son's school to complain to a teacher who gave the boy a quarter for writing 'the best poem' ('I often do that, it makes them work harder'). Inevitably, he moves into ever greater isolation, attempting to build his own house in the wilds, near the ocean where lies the wreck of a stranded oil tanker. His wife leaves him, he eventually breaks his contract with his partner (no villain, a decent if uncomprehending man who does his best to hang on to him). The (almost) final scene (their last meeting, we assume) has the two men on the wreck during a rain-storm. The partner asserts his position, a beautifully played mixture of shame and defiance: he has a new job, with the Provincial Housing Authority, '...salary, pension, benefits, 9-5, civil service, the works. And do you know what else? I got the job through a friend of my old man's. What do you think of that?' It is the last time we see them speak to each other. They move apart, and the scene ends with a longshot of them at the extreme ends of the wreck and of the screen, their backs turned to each other. There follows a brief epilogue: the partner flying back to civilization, telling the pilot first to turn so that he can look at 'that little house there', then abruptly, after a brief glance, 'Come on, let's get out of here. This is costing us money.'

The technique is not noticeably Brechtian in style, but we might invoke Brecht here: 'Making the familiar strange'. The film foregrounds all those little things we (living in a capitalist society) take for granted, and forces us to think about them: *Why* shouldn't a man have an Anne Hathaway cottage with two garages, if that's what he wants? *Why* shouldn't a teacher reward a little boy with a quarter for writing the best poem? *Why* shouldn't someone want a secure job with pension, benefits etc..., and what does it matter how he got it? And if we agree that we shouldn't, what alternatives have we short of living precariously and in isolation in a terminally unfinished house in the middle of nowhere? None, of course, but extreme social change. The necessity for a new, generous and human socialism hovers in the background of MacGillivray's thought, while remaining unspoken.

Life Classes. The Past Redeemed

I included *Life Classes* in my list of the 'ten best films ever made' in the last *Sight and Sound* critics' poll but one. My friends thought I was being quixotic but the choice was absolutely genuine. The very concept of 'the ten best' is of course absurd: everyone will be able, with brief thought, to come up with a hundred films that will vie for inclusion. Let me say, however, that I easily prefer MacGillivray's film to *Citizen Kane*, which in those days always emerged in first place. This will doubtless be greeted with incredulity, perhaps laughter, by many readers, but it seems to me readily defensible. Is *Kane* (for all its undoubted brilliance) 'intelligent about life?' Or is it, first and last, a self-applauding celebration of its maker's genius? I think I have watched *Kane* and *Life Classes* about the same number of times (whether for class discussions or for pleasure), and Welles' film long since went dead on me emotionally (I can still admire its skills, but coldly, as from a distance) and MacGillivray's remains as fresh, as moving, as surprising, as *intelligent*, as ever.

Another obstacle to the film's acceptance as the master-

piece I believe it to be, is the question of money. I watched today (at a press screening for the Toronto Film Festival) *Gabrielle*, the latest film by another director for whom I have the greatest admiration, Patrice Chereau. My mind, throughout, was half on *Life Classes*, because I was actually in the process of writing this section, and I couldn't help reflecting, from time to time during the screening, on our deeply entrenched capitalist prejudices. *Gabrielle* is, I think, a marvellous film, but much of its seductive splendour, its sense of artistic confidence and security, is based upon capital: the doubtless expensive presence of Isabelle Huppert (marvellous as always), the extravagance of multiple takes, lengthy rehearsals with dinner party guests...etc... Just look at the interminable end credits, which give the impression that half the population of France participated in the production. Then consider *Life Classes*, a film with no familiar actors, presumably a low budget (the party scenes of *Gabrielle* must have consumed at least a hundred times the film stock of the whole of MacGillivray's film), and an obviously tight shooting schedule (I'll admit to one or two moments where a few more takes might have marginally improved a scene). Does all this expenditure (which gives, admittedly, great, dazzling, unforgettable results) make *Gabrielle* a finer film than *Life Classes*? Not for me. I have to say, if I were bound down to a chair and threatened with terrible tortures, which film I preferred, I would choose *Life Classes*. It has more resonance.

Life Classes is also (because I am a man, some may say) my favourite *feminist* movie, partly because it never in any explicit way offers itself as such, and certainly never makes a self-conscious fuss about it. With most of the male-directed 'feminist' films of the 70s, when feminism was still fashionable, one gets the feeling that the director is aware that he is doing a brave, noble and only slightly condescending thing, 'speaking out' for the underprivileged. There is nothing of this self-consciousness or condescension in MacGillivray. He does not even emphasize 'women's oppression', he simply shows us a woman realizing herself, the obstacles seen as more societal than explicitly masculinist (the men being even more trapped, because less aware of it, than she is). No film in my experience is more 'intelligent about life' than the appropriately named *Life Classes*, the finest—the most 'intelligent'—Canadian film I have seen. The title itself has a dual reference: most obviously to the literal 'life classes' for which Mary poses in the nude for money and from which she learns to transcend her 'painting by numbers' and develop a genuine talent, but also to the way in which each step of her progress is a lesson in life, in which we watch (and share in) her steadily increasing awareness and sense of her own needs, her developing maturity, her ability to make her own decisions—culminating in her crucial decision not to marry Earl, although he is the father of her child and despite her continuing affection for him. The film makes it clear that she knows (without the slightest arrogance or self-satisfaction) that she is his intellectual superior and that marriage with him would hold her back: the relationship they have (as sexual partners and as friends) is the appropriate one.

The theme of preserving the past (in order, not to imitate it, but to learn from it, sorting out its mistakes from its positive qualities) is encapsulated in the haunting song that runs through the film, sung by Mary in both English and Gaelic,



Understanding Bliss

hence preserving her link with her past family history; it also has clear feminist overtones:

**'My child is my mother returning,
My mother, my daughter the same.
She carries us all in her yearning,
Our sorrow, our peace, and our pain.'**

There can be no more urgent social issue today than the need for a sense of cultural continuity. We are indeed in danger of losing the past, and the future with it, in the rush of modern culture into a sort of fast-food barbarism in which nothing matters but the latest, the 'now'—the latest fashion, the latest pop song, the latest teen comedy or digitalized sci-fi movie. MacGillivray not only sees this and embodies it in his plots and his characters, he sees with equal clarity its source: contemporary consumer capitalism, essentially dependent upon selling its latest products, while keeping the population occupied with constant noise and novelty and distracting attention from its devastation of the environment as we rush toward ultimate and perhaps final disaster. The human toll of

capitalism, its corruption of the self, was already the leading theme of *Aerial View*. In *Life Classes* it gets less stress, but it reappears importantly in two sequences: the Halifax landlady's account of the literal destruction of her ethnic environment for capitalist development, and the literal 'interference' by American power stations in undermining Earl's attempt to bring television to his locality with his own satellite dish. (That MacGillivray clearly respects Earl's enterprise should put to rest any sense that he is some sentimental oldfashioned fuddyduddy who rejects all progress and wishes for a return to the pre-industrial past; he simply suggests that we should use it carefully and intelligently, for the people rather than for profit. The commitment to a form of socialism, nowhere explicit in his work, is nonetheless very clearly there).

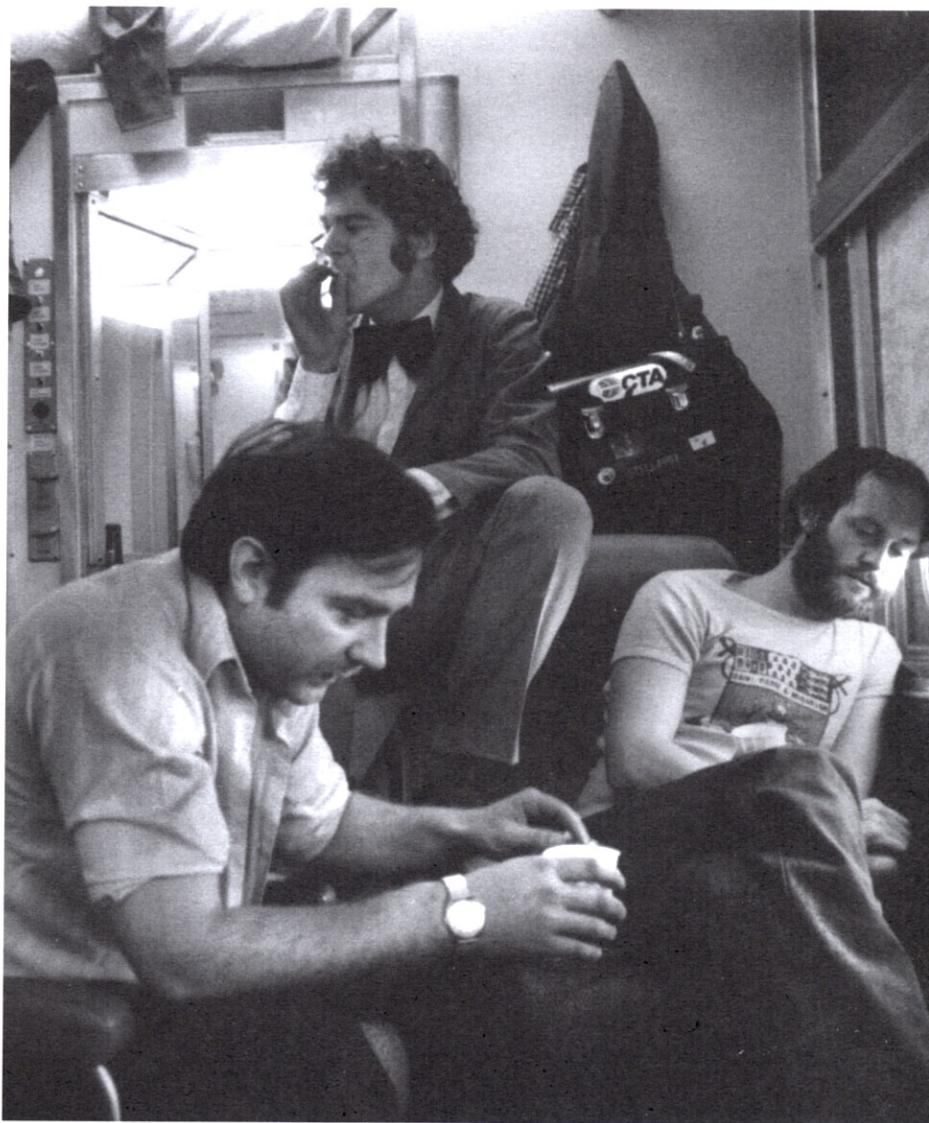
The core of the film—Mary's evolution, as a human being, as a woman, as an artist—I deal with extensively in the essay referred to above, and have not the space to repeat it here. Let me just say that it is dramatized quite marvellously in the various stages of Mary's developing consciousness as an artist and a woman, the crucial steps being (from her initial 'painting by numbers'): her job interview; the presentation/lecture

of the German woman artist (with Mary's seemingly naive questions at once embarrassing yet right to the point, the sequence a marvellous instance of MacGillivray's satirical side); the participation (as a model) in the 'life classes' (two 'paired' sequences composed of unbroken circular tracking-shots, the first centred on Mary, the second on the students' paintings); the extraordinary sequence, magnificently imagined and executed, of the TV art show with its nude bodies like crystallised encased in plastic, the scene in which, in this superbly constructed film, 'everything comes together'; and her final art exhibition, the pertinently titled 'One-Man Show' consisting entirely of nude and occasionally full-frontal sketches of Earl, the long art history tradition of the 'female nude' by the male painter at last reversed.

Understanding Bliss, The Past lost

Between *Life Classes* and *Understanding Bliss*, MacGillivray made another feature, *The Vacant Lot*. Though certainly not without interest, it continues to seem to me the weak link in what one can regard as a trilogy (about Nova Scotia/Newfoundland, about Canada, about contemporary culture). When it came out I slammed it somewhat hysterically. That was at a time when gays and lesbians were still fighting for their rights, and for respect, and I greatly resented what I saw (in one of the leading characters, leader of a female rock group called 'The Vacant Lot') as a demeaning putdown of a 'typical' lesbian, hysterical and domineering. I now see this as partly my fault (I have never been able to interest myself in rock music), and perhaps partly the actress's (very much a 'one-note' performance, without nuance, unusual in a MacGillivray film). Seeing the film again today, I can see that she is intended to be a feisty and determined member of a then-oppressed minority, and the leader of a specifically and committedly feminist group. Unfortunately, the film seems, still, the weakest of this (perhaps) trilogy, with neither the nuance nor the richness of its remarkable neighbours. (There's an awful lot of what I now understand to be *intentionally* less than great rock music, the group being inexperienced beginners struggling for recognition). Its last half hour is, however, worth waiting for, the film's progress into despair anticipating the greatly superior *Understanding Bliss*. The 'vacant lot' is gradually revealed as not merely the name of a rock group but Nova Scotia itself, and finally Canada, as the film's leading couple fly off to Los Angeles (a move which nothing in the film suggests will be any more fulfilling), leaving their car amid the snow and darkness.

Is *Understanding Bliss* the film that lost MacGillivray the support of his funding agencies?—a story about a middle-aged male academic directing a medieval Mummers' play and a middle-



Stations

aged female academic reading aloud a story by Katherine Mansfield?—and no 'special effects'! It is not exactly conceived to draw in the teenagers, and few films today are made for adults, let alone intellectuals who will know or care who Katherine Mansfield was.

As an artist MacGillivray is not easy to categorize. An acquaintance once defined *Life Classes* as 'minimalist', a term which for me instantly evokes the pleasant tinklings of Philip Glass. I see of course what he meant (each scene does exactly what it needs to do within the overall schema, no more, no less, we are never seduced by decoration), but the richness of that film (intellectual, emotional, political, structural) really defies such simplistic categorization. However (thinking ahead to *Understanding Bliss*) *Life Classes* does for the first time in MacGillivray's career raise the issue of 'Modernism', in its opening and closing framing sequences. We are in a smart, elegant, very clean shopping mall; a young woman is playing, on a violin, a variant of 'My child is my mother returning'. No one is paying her any attention or even seems aware of her presence. As the camera tracks, we see a whole wall of television screens on which Jacinta Cormier is being interviewed about

her character in the film, telling us that at first she found Mary hard to understand. No one pays more than cursory attention. Above the TV screens, in huge letters, is the word LIQUIDATION. The film's—or perhaps we should say MacGillivray's—thematic (past/present, humanity vs. capitalism, the sense of loss and possible emptiness) is already implicit. This is not so much 'minimalist', surely, as Brechtian (though one could equally invoke Brecht's great admirer,

Godard): foregrounding the medium, making the familiar strange, inviting the spectator to think, make connections, rather than be carried along on a wave of emotion. Brecht seems to me a strong (if usually implicit) presence in MacGillivray's work, especially in *Understanding Bliss*, and Brecht, today, when he is more necessary than ever, seems to have been banished from the cultural scene.

Understanding Bliss is distinguished from MacGillivray's



previous work by his extensive use of the Steadicam, its style characterized by long hand-held tracking shots, down streets, into buildings, up flights of stairs, through doors and rooms, involving us intimately in the character's movements. But the shots are never subjective: we are never invited to identify with either of the leading characters. The result might be defined as 'sympathy from a critical distance'. Neither character is fully endorsed, either as a person or as representing a

particular position; neither is rejected. The film traces the impossibility of their relationship, through the failure of their projects. Elizabeth's reading and discussion of Mansfield's story *Bliss*, for which she has travelled most of the way across Canada to St. John's, is attended by eight people; the rehearsal of the Mummers' play, though energetic, amounts to little more than 'kids having fun'. The cultural connections have been lost. The lovers, with their parallel but incompatible intellectual commitments (parallels can never meet), take their respective failures out on each other, in the bitter and violent (physically and emotionally) climactic scene. One senses in the film's background (though there is no direct borrowing) both Godard (especially the Godard of *Le Mépris*) and Antonioni. Or one might apply to the film E.M. Forster's 'Only connect...', more relevant here than to *Howard's End*. But if such influences are present MacGillivray makes them entirely his own.

In juxtaposition with the (muted, provisional) optimism of *Life Classes*, the desperation of *Understanding Bliss* seems bleak indeed, though painfully truthful, with the sense that our culture, under the capitalist erosion, has become indeed a 'vacant lot'. But the later film does not negate the earlier. We should see them side by side, as positive and negative reactions to the same cultural dilemma.

In Conclusion.

MacGillivray should be a major, vital influence within Canadian cinema. Instead, he seems in danger of disappearing altogether. His ambitious screenplay on (amongst other things) the Portuguese/Newfoundland fishing wars, from which I took my title, has never been financed. Within our brutal capitalist economy there is no room, and no mercy, for commercial failure, however distinguished the artistic success. What real attempts have been made to secure the continuing availability to the public of his films? *Life Classes* had a brief release on a less than 'state of the art' video, but is very hard to find. A recent search of the Internet revealed nothing available, anywhere: even Google had nothing to offer. We need, at the very least, carefully restored DVDs of *Life Classes* and *Understanding Bliss*, or ideally, a box set including *The Vacant Lot*, with the early films (*Aerial View, Stations*) as extras, made permanently available, and an interview with or commentary by MacGillivray. There is also his important work in documentary. Such an undertaking is surely not impossible: the Canada Council could surely combine with Telefilm Canada to produce such a box and make it permanently available. And what about a complete retrospective, including the documentaries, in next year's Toronto Film Festival, which annually highlights Canadian cinema? I would be proud to write the programme notes, free of charge, for any such undertaking. MacGillivray should be a major influence on the future of Canadian cinema. Instead, Canada seems to be throwing him away.

Notes

1. Since this was written I have seen *Water*, a major breakthrough, passionate, eloquent, fully realized, among the best films in last year's Toronto Film Festival.
2. *A History of Violence* is a strong noir melodrama, but I cannot see it as the profound study in the escalation of violence that has been widely claimed. Its midpoint revelation reduces it to that familiar gangster movie plot about never being able to escape your past.

The Days of Frozen Dreams

AN INTERVIEW WITH WANG XIAOSHUAI

BY ALICE SHIH



Wang Xiaoshuai

I first met Wang Xiaoshuai, one of the emerging sixth generation Chinese directors, at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1999, where he was promoting his 1998 film *So Close to Paradise*. At that time he was relatively unknown in North America and overshadowed by the more established fifth generation directors. Under these circumstances other directors would probably have tried harder to promote themselves, but Wang was comfortably low key. In the beginning of our discussion he was polite and reserved but as we continued he became more animated and passionate. He talked openly about his being blacklisted by the Chinese censorship bureau and how he, along with many of his peers, was forced to go underground. It seems absurd for those of us in the West who grew up with super-8 home movies that capturing moving images with a camera could cause such a commotion.

In April of 1989 student-led protesters gathered in Tiananmen Square demanding the government institute economic and political reform. In the early morning of June 4th the army entered Tiananmen Square and crushed the student-led movement. The government reaffirmed its control of the arts. Fifth generation directors who had the support of the state-run studios were still able to make films as long as their ideas did not run counter to government policies but the new generation of more freethinking and radical directors were completely shut out. Being denied freedom of expression only toughened their resolve and so they began their journey as illegal underground filmmakers. Chinese officials condemned the grim sub-

ject matter of their films, disregarding the fact that it was precisely their ill treatment of these directors that had fuelled their discontent. As most of them were born after the Cultural Revolution, their personal life experience may not have been as austere as the fifth generation directors but their artistic journey was one of frustration and turmoil. These personal experiences are duly portrayed cinematically by Wang. His stories are down to earth and his characters are close to reality like the loser next door, the confused school kid or the regrettable stubborn father. For Wang to have succeeded as a sixth generation director and to have consistently produced quality films is a testament to his talent, passion, and dedication.

Today, Wang is still modest, passionate and approachable, despite the fact that *Shanghai Dreams* (2005) garnered the "Prix du jury" in Cannes. In my conversations with him he takes us on a journey of how a young artist who took film as just another form of aesthetic expression, like painting or sculpture, found his calling as a filmmaker. He is still looking for the optimum balance between his artistic vision and public recognition, a challenge that has remained with him since day one of his film journey, like a dream frozen in time.

The following article has been assembled from material gathered during two conversations I had with Wang, between September, 2005 and February, 2006. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and I'd like to thank Yan Woo and Winny Zhang for transcribing the Chinese text.

AS: Why did you choose film as your career?

WX: I learned drawing when I was young. It wasn't because I wanted to have fun, but it was my father who pressured me into it, and I complied. It wasn't my real inclination. Maybe the pressure was too much when I was a boy, I somehow rebelled against it. Later I went to a high school which was tied to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts to study professional drawing, but when I was applying to university, I hesitated in choosing fine arts as my future career. I felt that my interest in drawing only came out of harsh discipline, and my basic techniques had flaws. I didn't feel much sense of achievement while doing drawings, so my inclination slowly shifted.

At the time, I hadn't actively pursued other universities, as all our graduates would apply either to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, or the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now renamed The China Academy of Art). I was trapped. Then suddenly I learned of the emergence of the fifth generation directors and films like Zheng Jun-Zhao's *One and Eight* (1983) and Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984). These films took the nation by storm, including us students. We were only aware of the Academies of Fine Arts, Music and Theatrical Arts until then, and we were thrilled by this new knowledge of the Film Academy. I discovered that I had more inclination towards films. I was hanging out with friends who loved to tell stories and we even did stage plays at high school. I had developed a deeper interest in this art form.

AS: You were influenced by the fifth generation directors but your films are very different from theirs.

WX: Yes, we are very different! Film was a new art form to us at that time. We didn't have enough knowledge about films then. When arts are created with a strong unique style, artists are all excited! For those of us who studied fine arts, this groundbreaking experience only laid down a starting point. This new shooting style influenced future filmmaking, and in turn affected all frontiers in China. Yet when I explored the fundamentals of films, I did not necessarily want to follow the same path as the fifth generation.

AS: Your films are also different from most sixth generation directors. For example in *Frozen* (1996), the story is about an artist who chooses death as his final form of artistic expression. Other artists usually don't look at art from this dimension; they usually find artistic expression as an outlet, not as a dead end. Can you talk about that?

WX: The reason why I turned to film was exactly because I felt I was inadequate in my fine arts training and it felt like a dead end for me. The social perception of artists was far from prestigious at the time as arts were only considered a sideline career. No one took artists or artworks seriously. When I was conceiving *Frozen*, modern arts had just landed in China. Things like performance art and installations were unheard of before. Chinese artists tapped into these new ideas and expressed themselves through these new means shortly afterwards, even though these attempts were imitations of the West.

Since it was a new era, we wondered if we were really so behind the times that we couldn't accept these new ideas or even if we should be welcoming these strange methods to express these new art forms. So we looked at the art scene with reservation and set up alternate standards, as we were trained to deconstruct and focus on fundamentals while at art school. In fact, an artwork was just a representation of the artist's viewpoint at the time. The lack of consensus was a manifestation of the instability created due to the emergence of a new art form, unlike today, when these art forms are recognized by a lot of people, more artists have experience and the Chinese art collectors hotly pursue these artworks. This process merely reflects the normal path of development.



AS: There is a common thread in your films, and that is suicide. Why is that?

WX: Suicides appeared in my films after 1994, after I finished my first underground independent film *The Days* (1993). Documents were handed down that put my name on the black list together with some other filmmakers who were also forbidden to make films. I wanted to continue filmmaking by way of independent productions but suddenly I found that it didn't work. Moreover, the whole arts and cultural scene was suppressed after the Tiananmen Square incident, and the issue of filmmaking was a very sensitive one. Therefore I felt oppressed and depressed. It was then I stumbled across this story of an artist who chose to end his life for the arts. Thwarted by the oppressive atmosphere around me I was inspired to explore the difficulties young artists had to overcome to express their artistic ideas in public.

AS: You prefer non-professional actors over stars, even for complex characters in *So Close to Paradise* (1998). How did you bring out such powerful performances in them?

WX: I consider that there are two types of actors, professionals and the rest. Even though some professionals have gone through proper training, they may not have grasped the true essence of acting. Only more talented actors can capture that. There are also a lot of people who lack training but possess some "acting" genes in their body. It is very important to see who has these "acting" genes during auditions and to liberate their potential. Through this process, you can find possible candidates who could portray your characters. In fact, you are trying to make that person expose his or her inner self. That would be my ultimate accomplishment. It is almost impossible for the non-trained actors to express big swings of compli-

cated emotions; but since our stories are very close to their lives, and the actions close to their own, they should be able to openly liberate these emotions. Some of these actors slowly become professionals after working with me.

Unlike professional actors who are more likely to pull off great performances after intense rehearsals, non-professionals would get scared if you put them through this repetition. It's better to rely on their instinct or their direct response. I usually do limited rehearsals but start shooting promptly. I'll let them act and rehearse at the same time. Therefore my shooting ratio is greater than most Chinese films. I use the actual camera to stimulate and enhance the performance.

AS: It has been more than 10 years since you made your first feature *The Days* (1993). Can you still recall how you felt then as a first time director?

WX: I feel that films are becoming more and more commercial nowadays, like a market commodity, soliciting expectations. Filmmaking was very simple then. If I wanted to shoot with my own ideas, I had to become a director. Back then, there was only the still camera that could record images on photo prints. If I wanted to turn my ideas into moving images by recording images in series; then only the film camera could materialize it. It was that simple. This was a result of my basic primitive impulse of liberating beautiful still imagery into moving imagery. Nowadays there are DV cameras and other video equipment which were non-existent in the early 1990s in China. I transformed myself into a filmmaker after going through the whole process of camera-rental, film stock purchases, shooting, processing, and printing, just to answer the instinctive call to create moving images.

AS: How did you raise money for *The Days* and other underground productions?

WX: At first I borrowed about 50,000 RMB (Chinese dollars) from friends. I then worked to save some money and put in my own personal savings until it was enough. When the film was completed, it went to film festivals across Vancouver, Rotterdam, Berlin and New York. I also got help from friends in Hong Kong like Shu Kei. He helped to introduce my films to film festivals worldwide. He even lent me some money for my second film. Some friends in the film industry chipped in even though they themselves were having a hard time. They recognized the hardships in this field. Some other friends who had made a small fortune in business dealings were also willing to help. We slowly built up our resources from a humble start.

AS: Why did you use the alias "Wu Ming" early in your career, for example, *Frozen*?

WX: I was already on the black list of forbidden filmmakers when *Frozen* was completed, and I was planning for my next shoot which I was hoping to have approved by the government. I was waiting patiently and to avoid complications, my attitude was to acknowledge the presence of the film but not its director. I only wanted the film to meet the public and I chose to stay anonymous.

AS: You started your artistic expression in the 2-dimensional arts. That is very different from the more complicated art form of film which also incorporates a narrative structure, characterization as well as a temporal element, in addition to the 2-D aesthetic requirements. How did you master the crossover?

WX: Yes, films and drawing are totally different. Drawing is two-dimensional. It is static, one composition with only one element. Film images are constantly moving with a temporal element. The aesthetics of one particular frame is not that important. The essence of film is to communicate your ideas through a chosen narrative form, through the appropriate structure and expression of the actors within a time limit. Colours, composition or the look come second in this art form.

AS: I see that your narrative structures are evolving throughout the years. For example how the story unfolded in *Shanghai Dreams* (2005) as compared to *Frozen*. Can you take us through this evolution?

WX: I was searching for the purest form of sensuality in *Shanghai Dreams*, which I had first encountered in *The Days*, my first film. It has been more than ten years and a lot of social changes have taken place. Tons of commercial or Hollywood films have managed to enter China and people consider that as the new standard of excellence. I chose to believe in the director's emotional expression. I wanted to go back to a primitive state of expressing my thoughts and I needed the purest method, and I found it in *Shanghai Dreams*. How it was expressed was just like *The Days*. It captured a similar flavour. That was very important for me.

After *Shanghai Dreams*, I'm now exploring and searching for a new form of narration that is meaningful to me, which can still preserve my attitude and sensitivity towards people and the society. That is what I have to do next.

AS: In your last two films *Drifters* (2003) and *Shanghai Dreams*,



you portrayed two very prominent Chinese father figures. Both would stop at nothing to dominate over his child. Are you trying to explore the role of the Father in the Chinese family as an extreme absolute power figure?

WX: When we were growing up, what we encountered or heard of the most was how to rear and educate the children for their future. This has been mostly the decision of the father in a family. Fathers probably carry more on their shoulders, including which direction a man should take to satisfy his needs, or deciding how to balance various priorities in life. I am not clear if this is the so-called powerful father figure, as I am not a philosopher. But in my own family, my mother has always been doing housework, apart from going to work. As for the rest, like what a kid should do at leisure, making me take up drawing, work arrangements or relocating the whole family from Guiyang, they were entirely my father's schemes. I see that all fathers carry these important responsibilities.

AS: A lot of your protagonists have flaws and problems, as in *Drifters*, *Frozen*... They all seem to hit dead ends wherever they go. Why are you interested in these flawed characters?

WX: Humans are basically vulnerable. We are all fragile deep inside our heart and soul. To survive the relationship of the individual against the universe and to withstand social pressure from the outside, people must train themselves to be stronger than the world around them. These mechanisms are acquired after birth but we are born weak. How we battle this complicated society differs from person to person, but I prefer to explore how the weak side is manifested in life. I sympathize with these flawed characters. As for the seemingly strong and successful, they are only wearing a superficial disguise. When they face illness, death or social changes, they become

vulnerable as well. It doesn't matter if you are an important figure, a president, a senator or extremely wealthy. You are still human and get perplexed and experience emotional upheavals. The weaker people often find the society working against their interests and fail to find a way out. I find it easy to portray these sentiments in my films.

AS: Do you think that these characters in different continents, facing the same problem, would react differently or not?

WX: I suppose they would respond differently after all, social development is not structured the same everywhere. I feel that the Chinese people struggle with their confusions, directions in life, and their survival against the environment without awareness. They are fighting blindly without being conscious of what is really causing the problem. They think that by having money or social status all problems will be solved. So the whole nation struggles unscrupulously to gain the wealth and recognition it thinks will solve this vulnerability, instead of stopping to self reflect

AS: Do you think that the younger generation like those in *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) is being pushed to face the same harsh problems as the adults are struggling with now?

WX: Yes, this has a particularly important effect on the youths. The future relies much on the condition of the next generation and their attitude. Are they contemplating the present or are they merely going through the same motions as their fathers or the crowd for money and social status. It is unsafe for the future if this phenomenon continues to dominate.

AS: You were a blacklisted director not too long ago. Which is your first official release in China?

WX: In reality, *So Close to Paradise* was approved after three long years of censorship in 1999. I heard it only played for one screening and then it was pulled. I don't consider that a normal release. *Beijing Bicycle* also took a few years for approval and missed the chance to open. So I have to say that *Shanghai Dreams* was my first official release. I felt really good about the experience. Although the box office revenue could not compare with the Hollywood or commercial films, I could reach out to attract a new audience. My films used to play only to a European crowd, so it felt fabulous to meet the Chinese finally. I got a lot of positive response. The Chinese audience has no problem following the narrative and they find the story close to their lives.

AS: What are you working on now?

WX: I'm devoting my time on the script of *Record of the Peach Blossom Spring*, (*Tao Hua Yuan Ji*: working title). It is a story probing youth problems, like the effects of the worldwide web on them. The web has created an enormous virtual world of diversity and discussions. Surfers find it fascinating and want to stay inside as long as possible, like the idealized world of the ancient Peach Blossom Spring. There are so many people who frequent internet cafes in China, and some of them learn useful skills and knowledge. But more people are becoming addicted to games instead, and social problems are emerging. Youths stay out all night and parental communication is breaking down creating dysfunctional families. This ultimately leads to criminal offences as these kids got out of control. This is the theme of my new film.

AS: When do you plan to start shooting?

WX: I haven't decided yet. If things go smoothly, I hope to start shooting in August or September of 2006. I'm not in a



Shanghai Dreams

hurry. I'm doing research for the script. I visited some internet cafes and mingled with the youths there. My next step is to establish a good story and turn it into an original screenplay in the next few months.

AS: What do you think is the most important need in Chinese cinema now?

WX: Balanced and diverse development. We produce about a hundred films a year here in China but there are usually only two or three known to the public. The rest remain unknown. There are some films that are negligible, but not all. Some may not be very commercial or may lack adequate marketing and promotion, but could be very good nonetheless. It would be a pity if these films slipped away unnoticed. I advocate a balanced development approach for all genres of films, not to concentrate only on a few blockbusters.

AS: What is the most difficult thing you're facing as a Chinese director?

WX: Being a director is not so difficult, but to become the kind of director who can realize his own thoughts involves tough explorations. I believe that society needs films like ours but this need is not very urgent at the moment. So what do we do at this point? This problem is not mine alone; some other really good films are struggling to find their audience in the theatres too, and this I think is a real problem.

AS: The fifth generation directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are now moving towards big budget commercial productions. Do you want to make your own blockbusters or you are going to stick to your artistic vision?

WX: Subjectively speaking, of course I would very much want

to preserve my ideas, my style and get the recognition from the audience. This would be an ultimate blessing. That is why I said that the film industry has to develop in a balanced fashion to accommodate films with personality and opinion. These alternative films should be allowed a market share, not necessarily a big one since the mainstream commercial films audiences would still be supporting the market primarily. These unconventional films should have their own audience, in an ideal situation.

I would imagine all directors have a different temperament and personality. Every one of us looks at the world in a different way, and is good at making certain kind of films. We should be allowed to make films that we excel in.

Filmography as Director:

2005: Shanghai Dreams (Qinghong)

2003: Drifters (Er Di)

2002: After War (Seolnal)

(short: made for Jeonju Film Festival, Korea)

2001: Beijing Bicycle (Shiqi Sui De Danche)

1999: The House (Menghuan Tianyuan)

1998: So Close to Paradise (Biandan, Guniang)

1996: Frozen (Jidu Hanleng) (credited as "Wu Ming")

1994: Suicides (Da Youxi)

1993: The Days (Dong-Chun De Rizi)

Alice Shih is a film critic for Fairchild Radio, the only national Chinese broadcaster in Canada. She is a board member of the Toronto International Reel Asian Film Festival, and specializes in films from Asia, the Asian Diaspora and Canada. She has been published in film magazines including Cineaction and POV.



The Brig

THE PARADOX OF RESISTANCE AND RECUPERATION

BY NICOLA GALOMBIK AND MICHAEL ZRYD

If anyone still wants to make a “real” movie out of Brown’s play, to “adapt” it to cinema—he may well do it. Brown once told me he had an idea for a million dollar production of *The Brig*, with thousands of prisoners. It should be done. The point of cruelty done by one man to another can never be overstressed. I, myself, I am not interested in adapting plays, I always said so and I am repeating it here again. *The Brig*, the movie, is not an adaptation of a play: It is a film play; it is record of my eye and my temperament lost in the play.

—Jonas Mekas, “Shooting the Brig”, 1965¹

What is remarkable about Jonas Mekas’s *The Brig* is neither simply the clarity with which it tells us about the American military nor its interest as a record of a theatrical production in the 60s. Rather, as Mekas himself suggests, it is a record of Mekas himself—a record of Mekas’s own understanding of and relation to repressive societal apparatuses and the social function of art. We will read *The Brig* in the context not only of Mekas’s personal trajectory as historical subject and filmmaker, but in so far as that trajectory is carved in the broader film, protest and beat cultures of which he was a part. We hope thereby to trace and illuminate some of the contradictions endemic to the specific filmic, social, and political practices prevalent in some oppositional cultures of the 60s in America, especially in relation to a dominant register of that opposition, the problem of agency.

Our reading of *The Brig* is polemical and allegorical. We will suggest that the text embodies a critique of late industrial capitalist society (represented here by a military brig); it gives expression to the impulse of the beat generation, the New American Cinema, and Jonas Mekas himself (as cameraman), to retreat from society in the hope of procuring self-expression and thereby social renewal and a “clean[ing] out” of “our civilized inheritance.”² Finally, we will argue that the text literalises its own collusion with the structure that it purports to resist and negates its own utopian operation in a recuperative gesture which instantiates the paradox of resistance and recuperation that seems to beset American oppositional politics even today.

The Brig is perhaps Mekas’s most concentrated textual instantiation of the topography of contradictory shifts and retractions that mark the relation between the underground and what he saw as the dominant American culture in the 60s. It is instructive to examine the circumstances of the film’s production and consumption. Mekas films *The Brig* illegally in March 1964, sneaking into the theatre with the actors and stage crew the night before the play was to be closed by tax authorities.³ But although the film, in terms of both its production and distribution, constituted itself outside the mainstream commercial industry, it did enjoy a great deal of mainstream critical reception after winning a prize at the Venice Film





Festival.⁴ Furthermore, the censorship battles Mekas waged around *Flaming Creatures* and *Un Chant D'Amour* in the same year he made *The Brig* attracted the attention of the police and subsequently the press. This foregrounded for the self-defined underground the question of different forms of social agency and a dialectic of visibility/invisibility, of insider/outsider positioning in relation to dominant society.

Mekas concludes his overview of 1964 in his *Village Voice* column by describing the three options that face the underground at a moment when it comes into contact with dominant society:

In 1964, film-makers left the underground and came into the light, where they immediately clashed with the outmoded tastes and morals of the Establishment, the police and the critics. [...] By autumn, however, the tone of the press, the snides, began to change to fatterly friendliness. The fashion was about to be born. The magazines and the uptown decided to join the underground and make it part of the Establishment. These new tactics of the Establishment brought an obvious confusion into the ranks of the underground. The year 1965 starts with the underground directors, stars, and critics regrouping and meditating. There are three choices: 1. to be swallowed by the Establishment, like many other avant-gardes and undergrounds before them; 2. a deeper retreat into the underground; 3. a smash through the lines of the Establishment to the other side of it (or above it), thus surrounding it.⁵

Mekas seems to set out three options—cooption, retreat, and intervention—options which he articulates in complex ways in his writings of the period. In the discussion which follows,

we observe two slippages in Mekas's formulation: first, that retreat is itself construed as intervention and indeed is theorised as the only possible and desirable form of social action still available to resisting subjects in late industrial capitalist society. Second, this slippage between retreat and intervention instantiates a further contradiction of the historical moment: intervention as retreat is always already recuperated, "swallowed by the Establishment."

We can see how retreat is theorized as intervention in "Where Are We—the Underground?", a commencement address to the Philadelphia College of Art, where Mekas narrativises a 'history' of the Beat Generation:

There were poets, and filmmakers, and painters—people who were also walking like one thousand painful pieces. And we felt that there was nothing to lose anymore. There was almost nothing worth keeping from our civilized inheritance. Let's clean ourselves out, we felt. Let's clean out everything that is dragging us down—the whole bag of horrors and lies and egos. The Beat Generation was the outgrowth, the result of this desperation; the mystical researches came out of this desperation.⁶

The utopian tone of Mekas's Philadelphia address follows from the terms of the third option above, "a smash through the lines of the Establishment to the other side of it (or above it), thus surrounding it." These terms are utopian in their metaphysical conception of a space at the "other side of," "above," or "surrounding" society. But it is exactly in these essentialist and utopian terms that Mekas now posits an inner self which is pure and unmediated by the social.

Our protest and our critique of the existing order of life can only be through the expansion of our own being. We

are the measure of all things. And the beauty of our creation, of our art, is proportional to the beauty of our souls.⁷

Here, the slippage between retreat and intervention is articulated. The individual inner self is conceived of as the “other side of,” “above,” and “surround” of society. The terms of intervention are those of retreat. It is the retreat into individual subjectivity and the battle for inner freedom which become the means to “smash through the lines of the Establishment.” Mekas says:

We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that. Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we have to improve ourselves; that only through the beauty of our own selves can we beautify the others. Our work, therefore, our most important work at this stage is ourselves.⁸

Social intervention is conflated with self-actualization and self-expression. Retreat is constructed as a politics with a specific investment in the priority of the individual and personal vision.

Mekas’s writings in this period crystallise the imperatives which characterise Beat Culture more generally. As David James suggests, the privileging of “the liberation of consciousness,” “the ethic of individualism” and “a wider rejection of the political as such” all conceived within a utopian and “autonomous” artistic practice are what characterize what he calls “beat quietism.”⁹ James says of the Beat Generation:

The beats did produce critiques of mainstream society—of its lack of spontaneity or joy, its conformity and repressiveness, its moribundity, and especially its cold-war militarism. But the dominant beat response aimed not to change American society so much as to disengage from it in acts of individual rebellion.¹⁰

Art is the ultimate social gesture, the ultimate “act of individual rebellion.”

Artistic creation became an act of psychic wholeness and ecstasy, a model and source of social renewal and the vehicle of social dissent.¹¹

Even where the critiques of mainstream society took a more conventional political form, for example in the Free Speech Movement founded at Berkeley in 1964 (the same year in which *The Brig* was produced), we find this impulse to withdraw from the system, to privilege the realm of individual expression and to mark it as the site of freedom and thereby social renewal. Mario Savio in his founding speech in front of the Berkeley Administration Building proclaims:

There is a time when the operations of the machine become so odious, make you so sick at heart, that you can't even tacitly take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels [...] to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people that run it, that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all.¹²

The series of idealist assumptions which underpin such a statement are emblematic of the paradox of social engagement articulated by Mekas and characteristic of the 60s social movement as a whole. Savio’s speech once again relies on the assumed separations between “the machine” (Mekas’s “Establishment”) and “you” (the individual subject). It also involves an identification of freedom with expression and a state of being, rather than, for example, with the ability to transform existing social and economic institutions of power and subjection.

A military brig offers a very rich and powerful metaphor for late industrial capitalist society as that society was experienced and challenged by Mekas and the underground. In Althusserian terms, a brig functions as a literal metaphor for all state apparatuses which function both by repression and by ideology, that is, secured by force or by interpellation. It is simultaneously a military apparatus, a prison, and a school designed for the “reformation” of the wayward soldier to reinsert him into the military.¹³ It is an apparatus specifically for the production of subjectivity, a subjectivity modelled on particular and self-reproducing norms. Although it is entirely structured by force, in an important sense the brig also functions by consent and submission.

Michel Foucault’s by-now familiar metaphor of the panopticon provides a useful approach to *The Brig* and the particular form of social critique (and recuperation) it embodies. “Panopticism,” as elaborated in *Discipline and Punish*, functions as a metaphor for what Foucault calls “the disciplinary society.”¹⁴ Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham’s nineteenth century “dream” of a prison to describe “the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline [...] throughout the whole social body” and more generally as a metaphor for modern epistemology and new regimes of power.¹⁵ For Foucault, the panoptic metaphor is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form [Y] a figure of political technology.¹⁶

The Brig reproduces the conditions of the panopticon’s optical system. In Bentham’s panopticon, the warden can see into every cell but the arrangement and lighting of the cells insures that the prisoners inside can see neither the warden nor their fellow prisoners.

They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately.¹⁷

In The Living Theatre Company’s theatrical production *The Brig*, the staging of the play reproduces this voyeuristic spectatorial relation, putting the audience in the position of the warden watching, from an omniscient position, the “theatre” of the prisoners’ lives. Through a strongly articulated proscenium arch, the distance between spectators and the performers as objects of the gaze is established. Furthermore, the object is framed twice-over for the theatre audience as they peer through two wire fences: a widely-spaced barbed-wire grid at the front of the stage and a second chicken-wire cage within which the ten prisoners live. The four guards occupy the space between the two wire fences and thereby control

the space between spectator and prisoners. The optical regime even applies to control of the prisoner's vision; they must always keep "eye's front" (not permitted even to look down to tie their shoes) and may not look the guards in the eye.

The space of the brig is articulated not only by fixed boundaries (the two fences and doors) but by arbitrary boundaries—"white lines" which separate cell and hallway and sections of the hallway itself. Prisoners may not cross those lines without requesting (often repeatedly) and receiving the permission of a guard. The arbitrary and constructed nature of the rules of permissibility is foregrounded. Foucault's description of the panopticon's "compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" suits the space of *The Brig*: an enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised.¹⁸

A process of de-individuation can be traced through various facets of the brig. Within this overall space, each individual is allotted a specific space, their bunk. Prisoners are stripped of their names and assigned numbers instead, representing the de-individualisation and institutionalisation of identity in the interest of technocratic efficiency. When lining up or sounding off, the prisoners do so in numerical order.

The specifically panoptic mechanisms of disciplinary control—*isolation and control by surveillance*—are enunciated in the way rules attend to the minutest details of the everyday lives of the inmates by careful control of the location of the bodies of the inmates in time and space. Movement is ordered in a number of ways. Prisoners may not move without permission; when ordered, all movement must be performed in a run or trot. What Foucault calls "the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life" extends to urination, bathing, sleeping, and waking which are all permitted only at designated times.¹⁹ Even leisure is determined; in the play's sole moment of levity, each prisoner is allowed one cigarette which he smokes vigourously before being told to extinguish it.

When the prisoners have no work to do, they must stand at attention at the foot of their bunk reading the Marine Manual. This rule hyperbolises, on the one hand, the economy of the socialization process (no time is wasted), and its absurdity (reading times are often too short to allow any comprehension of the manual). The education process itself is designed to work against instinctual bodily reaction through the administering of demands which contradict reflexive responses. For example, a prisoner is punched in the stomach by a guard who tells him to "stand at attention" in contradiction of his reflex to bend over.

The extension of what Foucault calls "the infinitely minute web of panoptic techniques" into the prisoner's physical lives is extended, indeed directed to, the control of the prisoner's mental lives.²⁰ The form that this takes is not "brainwashing" but rather a form of self-policing set up by the optical regime of the panopticon's architecture. The most important feature of the panopticon is not simply that the prisoners are being watched, but that they know they are being watched and therefore restrain themselves from breaking the rules. Like Mario Savio's Amachine, the panopticon is an automata whose systematicity and totalizing energies construct the subjectivities of its inhabitants; as Foucault writes,

"This represented the abstract formula of a very real technology, that of individuals."²¹

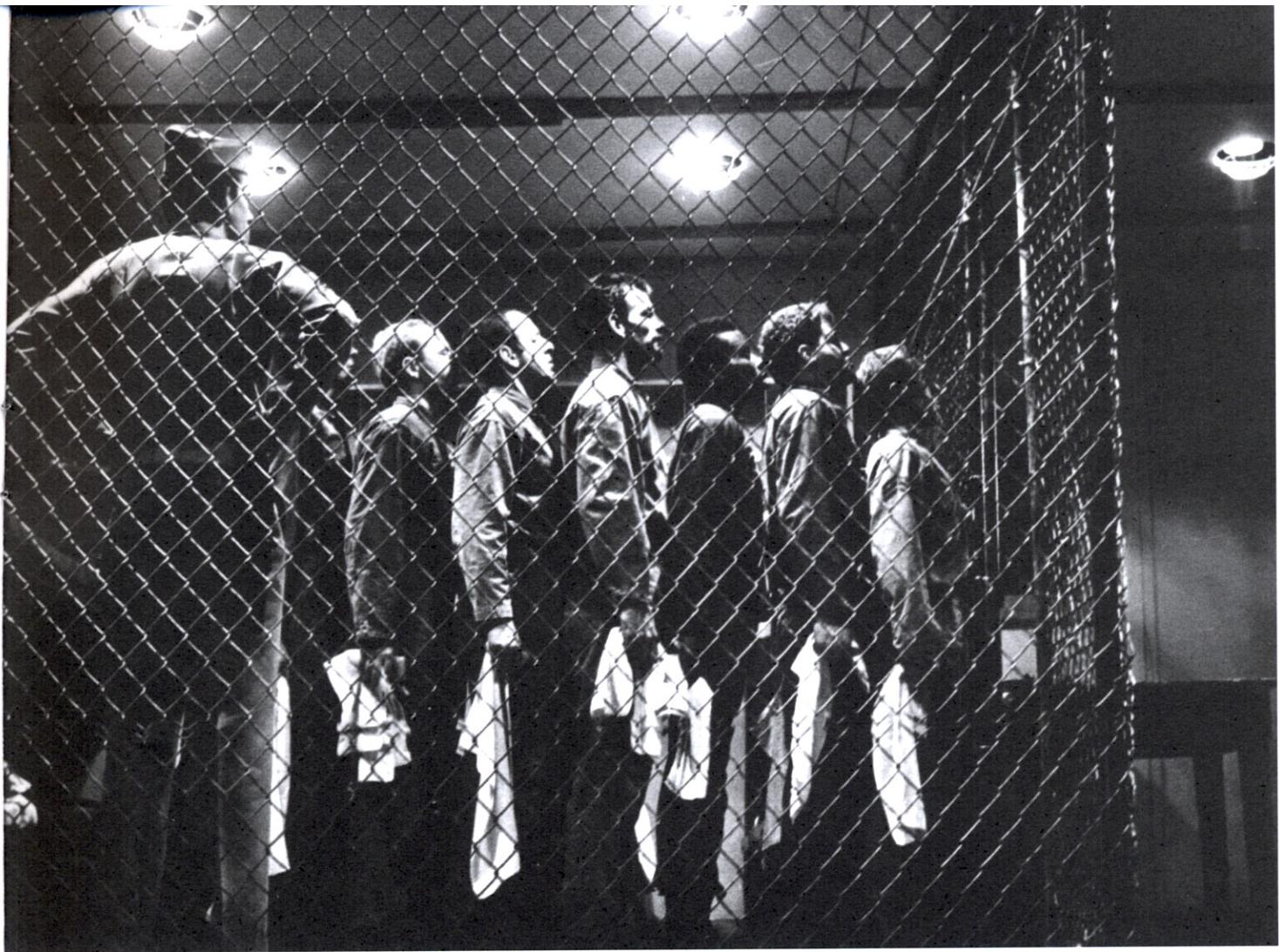
It should be noted, however, that *The Brig* does not entirely conform to Foucault's model. Foucault argued that the panopticon=s Asubtle, calculated technology of subjection would supercede Athe traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power.²² But the prison in *The Brig* is nothing if not violent, full of violent beatings, noise, and torture. The guards' cruelty is excessive and relentless, emphasized by the cyclical routine suggested by the time titles (4:30, 6:30, 11:30 etc.). We can read this manifest violence as the work's dramatization or exposure of the otherwise unseen *psychic* violence of the panoptic form of self-subjection. *The Brig*'s denial of the docility of the panopticon heightens its critique of disciplinary society by suggesting the compatibility of both manifest and latent forms of the violence of subjugation.

In *The Brig*, the institution of the norm is crushingly emphasized by the obsessive repetition of action, which works, moreover, to insure the "voluntary" subjection of the prisoners to power. In as much it is internalised it is consensual—although it is a forced internalisation. It is important to note that the brig depicted in the film is identified (in an intertitle) as one for occupational troops in Japan. As such the marines are volunteer rather than drafted soldiers. They have, in one sense, willingly joined the army, have subjected themselves to that institution, been interpellated by it to the extent that they will subject themselves to its correctional facility, that is, its technology of surveillance, discipline and punishment. The apparent "options" available to prisoners within this structure for the construction of subjectivity are dramatised in *The Brig* through the processing of three prisoners: one is released; one breaks down and is removed in a straight-jacket; a third, a new prisoner, is initiated by the guards and the other prisoners. There are in fact only two options: conform (do your time) or go mad ("retreat" from the system entirely). Either way, the individual will be replaced: the brig is hermetic and circular in its production process.

In filming *The Brig*, Mekas as cameraman rejects the theatre spectator's fixed position in relation to the action. The theatre spectator's position is a panoptic one—powerful in being all-seeing—but at a remove from the events. In describing his own theatre experience of the play, Mekas has this to say:

I walked out of the play. I didn't want to know anything about what would happen next in the play; I wanted to see it with my camera. I had to film it.²³

The beginning of the film dramatizes this shift in viewer position. The film begins with four static establishing shots which present the cage and its sleeping inhabitants being observed over the shoulders of the guards. But thereafter, the film's dominant mode is that of the hand-held subjective camera constantly shifting position within the action of the drama. Mekas refuses the distance and framing that define the voyeuristic spectator position of the play, choosing, instead, a place almost in contact with the action and allowing for a mobile, subjective, and "un-ruled" framing of the events. Mekas describes himself as a subject in constant crisis during the filming process:



I remained inside the brig, among the players, constantly stepping in their way, disrupting their usual movements and *mise-en-scènes*. My intention wasn't to show the play in its entirety but to catch as much of it as my "reporter" eyes could. This kind of shooting required an exhausting concentration of body and eye. I had to operate the camera; I had to keep out of the cast's way; I had to look for what was going on and listen for what was said; I had to make instantaneous decisions about my movements and the camera movements, knowing that there was no time for reshooting, no time for mistakes: I was a circus man on a tightrope high in the air.²⁴ (1972, 191)

In an earlier essay, Mekas describes why he privileges improvisation:

It was in his quest for inner freedom that the new artist came to improvisation. The young American film-maker, like the young painter, musician, actor, resists his society. He knows that everything he has learned from his society about life and death is false. He cannot, therefore, arrive at any true creation, creation as revelation of truth, by reworking and rehashing ideas, images, and feelings that are dead and inflated—he has to descend much deeper, below all that clutter, he has to escape the centrifugal force of everything he has learned from his society. His spontaneity, his anarchy, even his passivity are his acts of freedom.²⁵

Mekas suggests further the social implications of this instantiation of freedom through spontaneous gesture:

For him [the new American filmmaker], neither spontaneity nor improvisation are aims in themselves. Neither are they means to esthetic goals. For the new American generation spontaneity serves an ethical purpose.²⁶

Yet, as we will attempt to demonstrate, *The Brig* dramatises a paradox within its own gesture for liberation: the contradiction of resistance and recuperation.

Spontaneity as liberation, as bliss, as a means of freeing one's self from the moral, social clichés, out-dated mores, the business way of life. It is an outgrowth of the same ethical preoccupations, of a desire to be close to earth, of believing only in an immediate experience, in an action, which, in a different way, could also be found in Robbe-Grillet's de-mystification of man, a coming down to facts.²⁷

What is the "earth" that Mekas gets close to and which "facts" does he come down to in his filming of *The Brig*? For it is precisely in the celebration of self-expression—"spontaneity as liberation"—that the brig as metaphor for "the machine", "the Establishment", "civilised inheritance" is *naturalised*, treated as if it were an immutable reality rather than produced and constructed. If the film is to be authentic it has to be

spontaneous. Hence he not only insists on seeing the stage action for the *first* time through his camera but also on treating it as if it were reality itself—unpredictable and unrepeatable. In doing so, he disavows the constructed nature of *The Brig* as a play.

[T]he performance [...] moved with the inevitability of life itself. As I watched I thought: Suppose this was a real brig; suppose I was a newsreel reporter; suppose I got permission from the U.S. Marine Corps to go into one of their brigs and film the goings-on: What a document one could bring to the eyes of humanity! The way *The Brig* was being played now, it was a real brig as far as I was concerned.²⁸

This imaginary position simultaneously naturalizes the content of vision and subjectivises the form of vision. In filming *The Brig*, Mekas first refuses the physical position of the panoptician theatre spectator to adopt an imaginary spectator position inside the brig—a position which resists the architecture of the panoptic regime. But this resisting position is constituted upon the disavowal of the brig's fictional, constructed nature, what David James, in another context, evocatively describes as an "ideologically complicit positivism."²⁹ If a brig is an emblem of panoptic society, then the film, in its gesture of resistance, functions, by a strange twist, to naturalize that society and so understand it as unchangeable and immutable.³⁰ Mekas acknowledges this immutability as the foundation for the quietism of the beat generation:

It is the so-called serious and engaged citizen who stiffens the "armors" of humanity by misleading man with false solutions and changes, by postponing man's realization of the fact that he, really, doesn't know the solutions and that he cannot know and cannot change anything, really.³¹

This statement eloquently captures the willful disempowerment characteristic of "beat quietism."³² In a vicious cycle, beat quietism is complicit in reproducing the conditions of alienation and atomization that prompted beat withdrawal from the political to begin with.

James extends this view to beat culture as a whole: "[T]he beats were anti-political rather than merely apolitical, believing that any systematic attempt to reconstruct society as a whole by rationally derived and progressively implemented programs could only reproduce the materialism and instrumentalism that made modern civilization."³³ The insistence upon unmediated perception as an alternate to "large mental structures that satisfy the desolate modern ego" is attendant upon a withdrawal from "any systematic attempt to reconstruct society as a whole by rationally derived and progressively implemented programs."³⁴ But it is precisely with this withdrawal that the dominant society is served and recuperated. In the very attempt to stand outside of history and society, that is, in the very claim that an outside is possible, lies the moment of the recuperation of the inside, constituting it as an hermetic structure and thereby "reproduc(ing) the materialism and instrumentalism that made modern civilization...."³⁵ Advanced industrial and imperialist capitalism become nature.

What is remarkable and valuable about *The Brig* is the

clarity with which it instantiates simultaneously a gesture of resistance and the negation of that gesture. The text allows for an evocative symptomatic reading of the double-bind facing the social actor in late industrial capitalism. Even when we appear most self-expressive, we are already framed by the processes of construction, determination, and history.

The paradox of resistance and recuperation, and its implications for the conception of historical agency and the conception of freedom in general is powerfully instantiated when, at the end of the film, the camera pulls back to reveal the stage, the proscenium arch and the theatre audience seats.³⁶ On the one hand the final shot can be read as a disantiation device which lays bare the process by which the brig has been naturalized and its constructed nature disavowed. On the other hand, the final shot can also be read as restoring the camera to the position of the panopticon, and thereby undoing or negating Mekas's gesture of resistance in choosing an improvisational and subjective mode of vision. With the camera restored to the theatre spectator's position, the text suggests its own recuperation into panoptic society (in the same way that the initiation of the new soldier into the brig suggested the capacity of disciplinary society to contain change and thereby recuperate itself). But, in demonstrating the process of its own recuperation, the text illuminates its historical moment.

* * *

There was a time, when I was sixteen or seventeen, when I was idealistic and believed that the world would change in my own lifetime. [...] I had faith in the progress of man, in the goodness of man. Then came the war [World War II], and I went through horrors more unbelievable than anything I had read in the books, and it all happened right before my eyes. [...] And it's still being done today, in Vietnam, by my generation. It's done all over the world, by my generation. [...] I wasn't one piece any longer; I was one thousand painful pieces.

It's really from this, and because of this, that I did what I did. I felt I had to start from the very beginning. [...] I wasn't surprised when, upon my arrival in New York, I found others who felt as I felt. There were poets, and filmmakers, and painters—people who were also walking like one thousand painful pieces. And we felt that there was nothing to lose anymore. There was almost nothing worth keeping from our civilized inheritance. Let's clean ourselves out, we felt. Let's clean out everything that is dragging us down—the whole bag of horrors and lies and egos. The Beat Generation was the outgrowth, the result of this desperation; the mystical researches came out of this desperation.³⁷

We have attempted to produce a symptomatic reading of *The Brig* as an instantiation of a particular experience of American society, a particular conception of the possible spaces of political resistance, and the paradox of that conception as one which was recuperative of the dominant social formation it set out to resist. This is by no means the only possible reading of the film. Rather we have privileged this reading of the text

because of its polemical value for a consideration of what is at stake in the political discourses of 60s protest politics as a whole. It is not the intention, nor the place of this paper to preach political strategy or program. Rather, our concern has been to generate, through our analysis of the text, a critique of the political assumptions, strategies, discourses and self-definitions which seem to have dominated the conception of the political field and its horizons in the 60s.

It has often been claimed, as it has by Mekas himself, that a non-programmatic politics of withdrawal and non-participation is the only rational and indeed possible form of politics in late industrial capitalist society. The system or "machine" of late capitalism is blamed for having forced American oppositional politics out of the communities and streets and into the academies, interest group lobbies, and the TV boxes. What Jameson calls "History as necessity" is echoed by Mekas when he speaks of his own filmic practice as "imposed upon him by his time, as the only possible route." These positions, however, are given ironic parallel by Kennedy's rather glib dismissal of political contestation in his address at Yale in 1962: "What is at stake is [...] not basic clashes of philosophy or ideology [...] but] the practical management of a modern economy."³⁸ Both those in power and those in opposition share the same sense of the inevitability of history, and specifically, the inevitability of history generated by the capitalist "machine." The lines between affirmation and resistance become blurred.

The Vietnam war ended but American Imperialism has not. McCarthyism stopped but political censorship and the insistence upon the alignment of patriotism with free enterprise remains, and has intensified. People achieved a number of civil rights but the gap between rich and poor in America is as wide today as it was in the 60s. People achieved a high degree of freedom of speech and expression and yet seem more ineffectual and distanced from the political decision-making processes than ever. People moved from the streets into the academies—and never came out again. The third world is increasingly globally disenfranchised and economically dependent and colonized. In Mekas's words, our "civilised inheritance" is still very much ours, "the whole bag of horrors and lies and egos." What are we to do with our "desperation"?

Our historical moment demands that we consider what is at stake in the still current crisis of political agency as articulated by Mekas in *The Brig*, that "history is necessity," that, as Mekas says, his practice is "imposed upon him by his time, as the only possible route." This articulation begs another question: Is the injunction of retreat simply true of late capitalist society today or is it itself a regime of truth functioning in the interests of the maintenance and naturalisation of existing power structures?

Nicola Galombik is a media consultant in Johannesburg who worked previously with the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) and as Head of Educational Television at the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation).

Michael Zryd is Assistant Professor of Cinema & Media Studies at York University. The first version of this text was completed in 1991, written in the shadow of the first U.S.-Iraq war.

Notes

- 1 Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 194.
- 2 Jonas Mekas, "Where Are We—the Underground?" *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 18.
- 3 Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Jonas Mekas," *The New Yorker* 6 January 1973, p. 38-9.
- 4 A myth developed around the film: that *The Brig*, a film of a fictional theatrical representation of a Marine brig performed by The Living Theatre Company, had won an award as a documentary. The film in fact, as was reported in *Variety*, won a prize "as best fictional film screened at the ...15th International Documentary Festival of Venice" (our emphasis). All of the critics below suggested that the film had in fact won the **documentary** award. See for examples: "The Brig," *Variety*, 9 Sept 9 1964; "N.Y. Fest: Short Takes & Tales," *Variety*, 30 Sept 1964; "Mekas's 'Brig' Wins at Venice," *The Village Voice*, 22 Aug 1964; "'Brig' Wins at Venice Documentary Fest; 2 Yank Pix Cop Kid Awards," *Variety*, 26 Aug 1964; "The Brig", by Howard Thompson, *New York Times*, 21 Sept 1964; *Time*, 25 Sept 1964; *Newsweek*, 25 April 1966; Andrew Sarris, *The Village Voice*, 21 April 1966.
- 5 *Village Voice* column written 7 January 1965, in *Movie Journal*, p. 175.
- 6 Mekas, "Where Are We," p. 18.
- 7 Ibid. p. 20.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 94.
- 10 Ibid. p. 93.
- 11 Ibid. p. 97.
- 12 Lawrence Wittner, *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate* (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 246.
- 13 In the film, the brig also functions as a mental hospital, differentiating, restraining, and expelling the prisoner who cracks. @
- 14 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 209.
- 15 Ibid, pp. 225, 209.
- 16 Ibid. p. 205.
- 17 Ibid. p. 200.
- 18 Ibid. p. 197.
- 19 Ibid. p. 198.
- 20 Ibid. p. 224.
- 21 Ibid. p. 225. In psychoanalytic terms, the panopticon as a metaphor for "self-policing" subjects can be understood as the massive introjection and internalisation of super-ego that characterises a means by which power is exercised ("the logic of domination") in modern society.
- 22 Ibid. p. 221.
- 23 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, p. 190. Emphasis in original.
- 24 Ibid. p. 191.
- 25 Jonas Mekas, "Notes on the New American Cinema," *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 106.
- 26 Jonas Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation," *Film Culture* 21 (1960): p. 17.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Mekas, *Movie Journal*, p. 190.
- 29 James, p. 51.
- 30 In *The Brig*, for all of Mekas's gestures to enter the space of the action, the actors never look back at the camera to acknowledge Mekas's presence. The world is literally separate and unchanging in relation to the social actor, the cameraman.
- 31 Jonas Mekas, "Notes on Some New Movies and Happiness," *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970): pp. 320-21.
- 32 James, p. 94.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid, p. 40, 94.
- 35 Ibid. 94.
- 36 The rigour with which Mekas had previously avoided showing the rest of the theatre in *The Brig* is made clear in Storm DeHirsch's *Newsreel: Jonas Films The Brig*: we see the extremely restricted space of the theatre as barely a foot separates the stage from the first row of seats. Mekas himself confirms this in his description of the filming process: "I placed two strong floods on the front seats of the theatre so I could move freely around without showing the seats" (Mekas, *Movie Journal*, p. 191). This foregrounds the anomaly of the final shot and suggests its gestural significance.
- 37 Mekas, "Where are We," p. 18.
- 38 Quoted in Wittner, p. 208.

Sexual Dependency

THE SPLIT IMAGE OF GLOBALISATION

BY MICHAEL SOFAIR

Sexual Dependency, the debut film of Bolivian director Rodrigo Bellot, presents the viewer with a series of teenagers whose empty existences are relieved only by bouts of random violence and sex. At first sight, it seems to retrace ground covered by filmmakers such as Larry Clarke, albeit with the sort of energetic visual stylisation typical of recent Latin American cinema. In this case, the hyperactive editing and camera movement are doubled in a relentlessly deployed split screen that offers events from different perspectives in parallel or concurrent footage to complement or counterpoint each other. After a successful run through the festival circuit, the film has largely vanished from sight, although it has been released on DVD. The combination of scattered praise and fleeting distribution followed by definitive neglect—a not uncommon fate for first features—may reflect that the film's content and technique are masterfully developed but superficially familiar, with its raw earnestness sometimes compromised by didactic demonstrations of the obvious. This response overlooks a serendipitous effect of the film's intricate structure, which uses multiple overlapping narratives whose central character also appears in other stories. Straddling Bolivia and the United States, they implicitly relate Western and non-Western experience in an unusually provocative, systematic and non-deterministic way. As much for its faults as for its elegances, which are apparent in equal measure, *Sexual Dependency* is an instructive case study of the obstacles to achieving artistic representation of globalised society.

Rather than a single picture of contemporary existence from a consistent point of view, *Sexual Dependency* offers us an array of perspectives which reveal a global process of standardisation at work undermining all pre-existing cultures, Western as much as non-Western. There are two basic dimensions to this process, sexual and economic, which are apparent in all the film's stories. The first three, which are set in Bolivia, explore the commodification of sexual and personal identity driven by conformity to an omnipresent image of the desirable body which is propagated by the mass media and unrelated to the realities of lived experience. They feature a girl from the slums coming of age unwanted while her more desirable friend is virtually date raped, a boy harried by his friends into losing his virginity to a prostitute and, finally, a rich, temperamental caricature macho Latin male preparing to leave to study in the U.S.

A curious feature of these narratives is that they have contemporary Western themes with only a seemingly coincidental setting



in Bolivia, a country deeply polarised by intense class and ethnic rivalries between a wealthy, white and increasingly separatist oligarchy dominating the lowlands (including Santa Cruz, where *Sexual Dependency* is set) and anti-capitalist indigenous communities. It is only once the film moves away from Bolivia, on to its two final stories set in the U.S., that the multiple narrative structure allows us to locate what we have seen in Bolivia as part of a larger whole, though without crudely relating America and Bolivia as cause and effect. This is particularly so given the American stories—depicting the travails of a closeted gay advertising model and a black woman rehearsing a theatre piece—have nothing in common with Bolivia, with the only explicit link—that the macho stu-

dent from Bolivia is raped by the model's fellow football players—appearing a gratuitous climax to the film. Outside the explicit narrative content, the economic dimension of globalisation gains representation as the film's structure works to retroactively rewrite our understanding of the Bolivian stories in light of the American ones while presenting the West as only one element of the system it propagates, and as much a victim of it as are the countries it dominates.

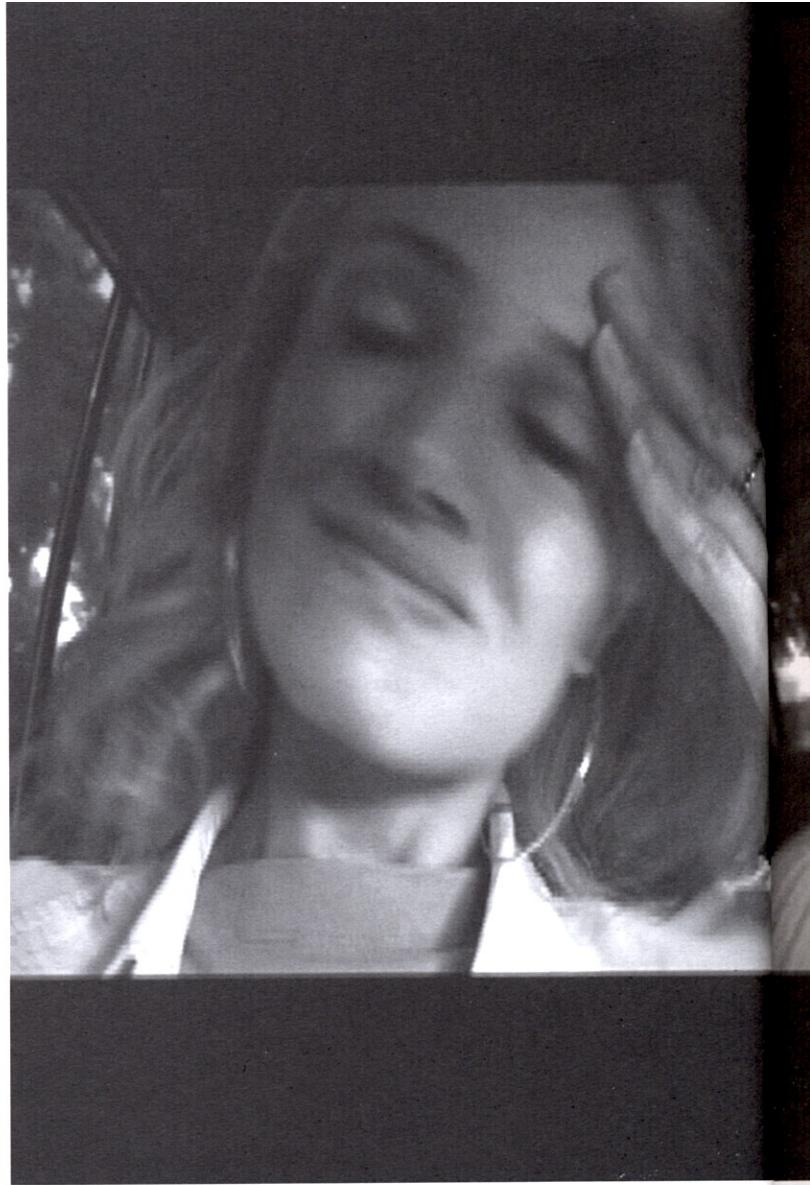
In this, *Sexual Dependency* fails to conform to the usual pattern for representing the division between the West and the Rest, in which films are either set exclusively in the West and deal with it in isolation, or set outside it and present life in a Third World country while the West appears, if at all, as the



source of conditions the film depicts. Such a division of labour might be considered a falsifying reification of interdependencies, differences and imposed uniformities which ignore national bounds. In contrast, *Sexual Dependency* attempts to depict the systemic nature of these commonalities. This need not be considered intentional, although it may reflect that the film is a rare Bolivian—U.S. coproduction with autobiographical roots in the experience of Bellot and co-writer Lenelle Moise, which similarly straddles the First and Third Worlds. More fundamentally, it is an effect of the film's structure of multiple narratives set in a Western and non-Western country. This does not imply the film must have the structure it does because of its subject or the world it depicts. Rather, following Frederic Jameson, the film, like any form, can be read as an "unstable and provisory solution to an aesthetic dilemma which is itself the manifestation of a social and historical contradiction."¹ To understand the aesthetic dilemma which drives *Sexual Dependency*, we might start with the contradiction.

A first thesis: contemporary American society cannot be fully understood without reference to the Third World realities which both sustain and destabilise it, while, conversely, those realities cannot be specified without relation to the Western society which overshadows them. Unless this interdependence is recognised, we see two seemingly disconnected worlds whose form appears at once inevitable and inexplicable. There is "the view from the top," which "reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads," and "condemns our culture to psychologism and the 'projections' of private subjectivity," and there is, as if in another world, "third-world culture, which must be situational and materialist despite itself."² It would follow that placing Western and Third World experience in relation to each other might expose the illusions, and shared realities, which lie behind both. But we can add a second thesis, which contradicts the first yet is equally plausible: it is not possible to represent the global system as a whole (and so to convincingly relate Western and non-Western conditions) because the forms of representation currently available to us cannot grasp the system's scope and complexity. The aesthetic dilemma driving *Sexual Dependency* is then to accept as its subject what is the most vital issue of our time, the remaking of human experience through the globalisation of capitalism, which is implied by the film's form and content, but cannot be satisfactorily represented by it.

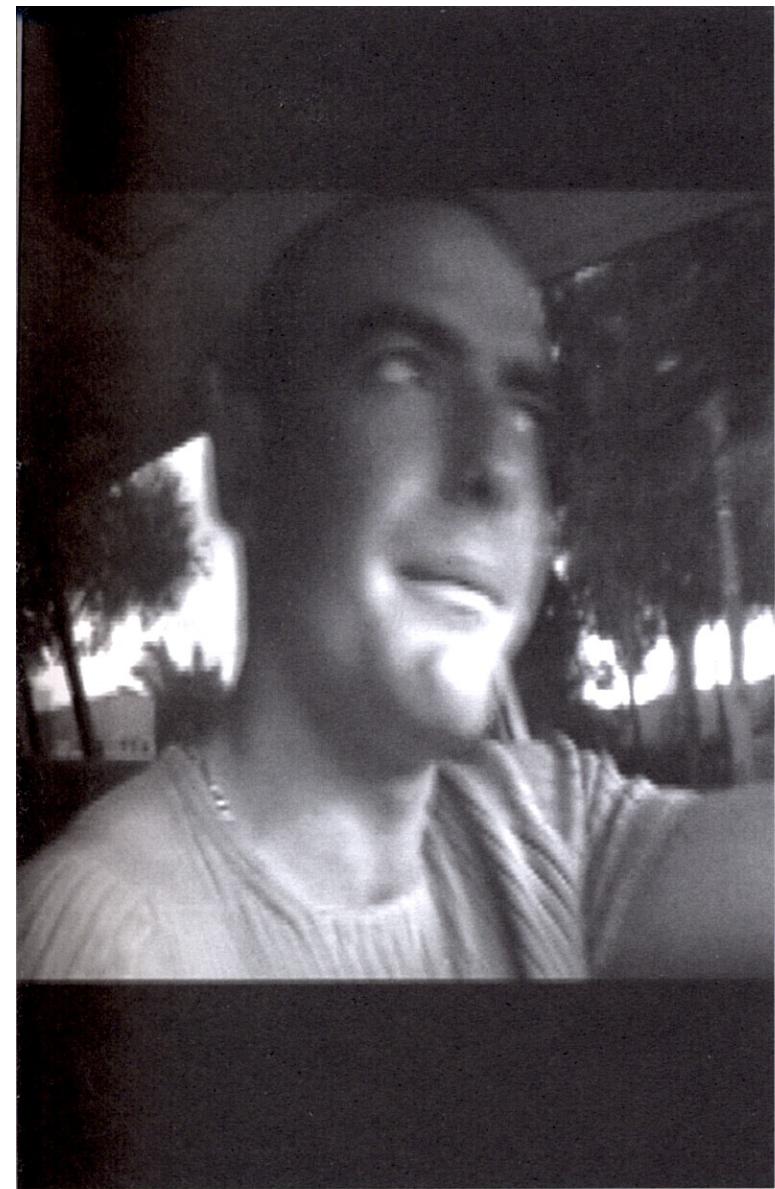
Sexual Dependency's visual and narrative complexity thwarts an individualistic conception of its characters, either through psychological explanation or identification with them. Instead, the film pushes us toward an understanding of its subject matter which is implicitly political, but also self-aware and analytical. An initial approach to considering the film is to regard the visuals as evoking, primarily but not exclusively, the fragmentation of personal subjectivity. Characters' struggles to control their body image are effectively demonstrated through the split screen technique which, in a sense, materialises their unstable identities by incorporating within the frame their own and other perspectives on their body to reveal dualities and inconsistencies. In contrast, the narratives explore more obviously social patterns of disloca-



tion, alienation and repression, with each narrative presenting a character manifesting a particular form of identity that appears at once stabilised and destabilised by equally particular power structures. The multiple narrative form then juxtaposes individual narratives with this content to problematise identity as we see how characters fare when transferred to other stories, where they are exposed to forms of power unlike those under which they have developed.

The division of labour between narrative and visuals is apparent from the opening Bolivian story, "My Baby is a Woman Now," which focuses on Jessica, who is turning fifteen, and her friend, Isabel. The narrative is driven by the pressure on the girls to adopt a traditional patriarchal sexual identity through overt oppression. So we see Jessica's brother criticise her best friend as a "slut," justified by the "everyone knows..." logic, which prompts Jessica's father to roughly wipe off her lipstick, grabbing her mouth with a brutality that suggests a readiness to violate her in other ways. Jessica's delayed reaction is to allow herself to be "seduced" by a boy, at once conforming and rebelling by giving herself indiscriminately.

Our reaction to this familiar content is complicated by the split screen imagery, which powerfully evokes the acute sensitivity of teenage girls to their body images. At Isabel's coming of age party, we see a row of girls dressed identically in pink,



with identically bright, expectant faces matching their dresses—and each other. Their line is refracted and extended through the two halves of the screen to suggest the replication of an ideal image of femininity, one which is made to appear artificial and unstable because of the oscillating point of inflection where the two screen images meet. Isabel, who is somewhat overweight and plain, stands off to one side watching the arrayed girls, which might suggest her desire for and exclusion from an image of beauty. Yet this reading confined to a psychology of character misses the essentially visual presence, the sheer excess, of this line of girls which evokes standardisation and universalisation—the body in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Jessica conforms to the standard for beauty and so becomes an object of the boys' attention. She is treated no less impersonally, undergoing an affectless and barely consensual seduction by Fabian, who we learn in the next story gate-crashed Isabel's party intent on "hooking up with easy girls from the slums." The faces of the boy and girl as they have sex appear on screen in separate close-ups, one in each image, which might have been expected to convey a stronger sense of intimacy than a conventional shot / reverse shot, but only emphasises their isolation. They are alone together, eyes closed, heads bobbing up and down, apart but caught up in

an unsettling rhythm which is in each, but not between or uniting them. Disassociation appears part of the sexual act, but also of a piece with the world of the film through which the split screen extends to present its characters in parallel and non-communicating solitudes.

The imagery in the second story, "You Goddam Whore," in which visiting Columbian teen Sebastian is shown a 'good time,' reflects the coercive physical dynamics of groups rather than the deindividuating isolation of bodies. The boys gather in configurations which sprawl across both screen images but seem, unlike the line of girls at the party, ragged and unruly. In contradiction to the boy's easy patter and jocularity, the visuals suggest division and factionalism and evoke, along with their endless struggles for attention, swearing and loudly voiced prejudices, a collective consciousness that does not admit difference or individuality.

Confounding a simple reading of these stories, there are frequent strange lulls which offer us a view of characters alone but are not quite credible as instances of individual expression. Some are only abrupt momentary stillnesses in one or both images, while others are more extensive. We see Jessica retreat to her room and sit placidly on her bed surrounded by cut-out magazine photos of boys, feeling secure in her private sanctuary, which is actually defined by commercialised images of desire. Sebastian also has an instant of solitary affect, which is equally compromised. As he realises his friends' pressure will force him to surrender his virginity, one half of the screen holds him in close up while the other offers us imagery which might give voice to his feeling, moving from the clear night sky symbolising childhood innocence, to the traffic roundabout with its suggestion of fleeting escape, only to return to his encircling idiotically simpering friends. But there is no reason to think Sebastian experiences his predicament in these terms. When he cries, he appears simply withdrawn from the situation and himself, reduced to inchoate emotionality.

Though real emotion is involved, these moments also suggest an absence of consciousness. They will acquire significance only when joined together in the film's concluding montage to evoke a kind of collective experience (which nevertheless remains without meaningful articulation). Outside this, they suggest that the impoverished subjectivity of the characters is accompanied by episodes of undifferentiated, generic feeling which Jameson relates to post-modern capitalism and calls "intensities" that "are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria..."³ The film presents these instances as being nothing more than residual instants not taken up into the world of public display, the vacuity of uncolonised internal space rather than the revelation of some inner life in relief from the pressure to perform and conform.

The third story, entitled "The Bluest Eyes in the World," centres on Choco, who appears close to the male ideal, rich, sexually assertive, strong, if also subject to wild rages and violent outbursts. Yet his predictable behaviour cannot be interpreted in traditional terms. For instance, the extended scene in which he admires his reflection in a mirror is no simple narcissism or autoeroticism. As Choco looks and seems to see nothing in particular, his identity is exposed as purely formal, an empty gaze on the image of himself. His self-inspection is

intercut with images from the next scene, of a fashion show in which his girlfriend appears, which makes his vacuous self-display seem part of an anticipatory fantasy of the show and the image-based consumption system of which it is a part. If he appears rooted in mirror stage confusion, in love with his image but unable to distinguish it from others, this is a mirror stage penetrated by commerce.

Choco's move to America to study provides a narrative continuity to reinforce the superficial resemblance in lifestyles and attitudes between the film's Bolivian and American characters. However, our sense of the film's coherence is abruptly disrupted at its end, when we belatedly realise Choco was raped in America. The perfunctory reduction of the stereotypical scion of the Latin American ruling class to anonymous victimhood may illustrate how a globalised capitalist society does not allow a secure position to anyone. More interesting is that it also proves an example of how the multiple narrative structure suggests the systemic nature of what seem individual stories, without reducing them to instances of some universal rule.

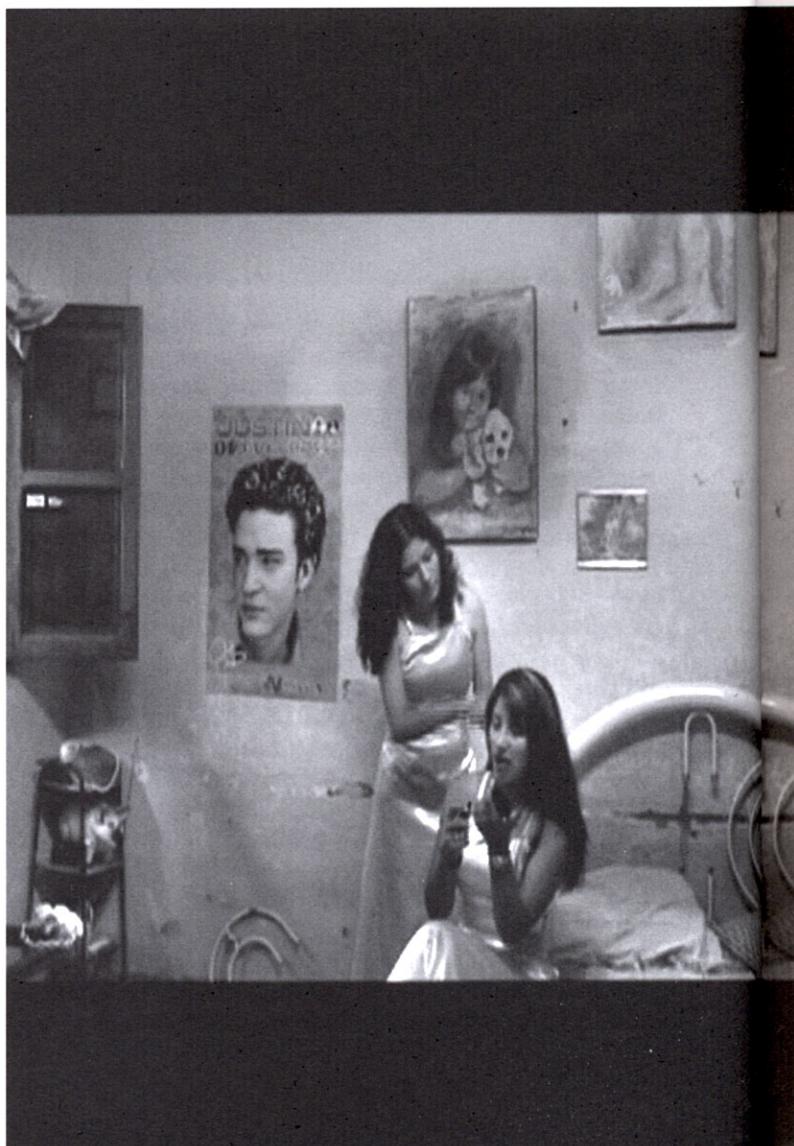
At first sight, Choco appears to become the object for the frustrations of a tangled network of homoerotic and homophobic bonds between a group of jocks in one American story, entitled "Angels and Billboards," but these cannot be considered in isolation from the social order evoked by the American stories' mise-en-scene. This is dominated by ambient motion and anonymous activity, with long sequences of characters moving around alone in the denatured institutional setting of a university campus and exchanging greetings of stilted bonhomie with unseen others. Also apparent in this story is the omnipresent mediation of images in interpersonal relations, which are thereby rendered so incoherent they approach the pathological. Students playing a boxing video game strangely resemble, without their shirts, the figures in the simulation, as if they have identified themselves with these unreal images. This would imply they are fighting each other through the images, while the others watching identify with the two playing / fighting, but only indirectly, through a primary identification with the figures on screen.

The replacement of social relations with mediating images is related to the standardisation of the body through a juxtaposition of two scenes in the split screen, one a football practice, the other the shooting of an underwear advertisement. We see the process of training the male body co-ordinated with the production of advertising that recreates this body as an object of desire. The common element is Tyler, who is on the football team and the model in the ad—and also gay and repressed. This reminds us that what might seem a process of abstraction—in which identity is "branded" with an overlaying image through advertising—is part of a system of production that remains fundamentally industrial, takes the human body as its material, and subsumes the traditional homosocial nexus which forms male identity.

Choco's homophobic rapist, Sean, is part of this nexus, as is Tyler, who is treated as one of the guys and included in their mocking locker room banter, even as it veers unpredictably into questioning sexual orientation. There are hints Sean senses something different in Tyler, which may explain the odd looks they exchange, but also would not disallow desire on Tyler, or Sean's, part. What is odd is that the "repressed" of

this predictable system is not hidden but flagrantly on display in Tyler, who is somehow safely hidden behind his image, his designation through advertising as the ideal object of desire making him untouchable. So all that happens is Sean wears the conspicuously branded "RIGO BosD" underwear that Tyler advertises in a potential repressed homoerotic identification, while Tyler's furtive glances seek and find male bodies everywhere, in the same underwear made desirable through association with his body. But this cannot be seen in terms of unconscious libidinal investments which exist in a state of pure Freudian cliche and are then co-opted into displaying and gazing on underwear. Sean wears RIGO BosD underwear and Tyler desires those who wear it simply because everyone wears RIGO BosD underwear—and for the same reason, which is that everyone wears it, completing what is a circuit not of desire but exchange.

Excluded from this circuit, Choco becomes a crude symbol for the Third World. The fundamental precondition for his being the object for the story's male confusion is that he appears to American eyes as simply that, an object. Though confident of participating in the American dream, on arrival, he promptly finds his English is not recognised as such by the assertive black woman who unmans him without even trying, then finds his roommates the very image of dudes hanging out, but is immediately made aware he is not to be one of



them. Equally quickly, he disappears from the scenes set in the U.S. as if to confirm his non-person status, re-appearing only after he has been raped, reduced to an agitated, violated body dislocated from character or story.

He is raped by what might be read simplistically as a personification of the West in the form of drunken white males, except that the rape's disconnected presentation spread through the film has the disconcerting effect of also making it illustrate the history of a black woman named Adina. We have already heard this recounted in the first American story, a monologue entitled "Mirrors" whose polemical litany of racial and sexual oppression culminated in Adina's voiceover account of her rape, accompanied by imagery which turns out to be of Choco's. However, we realise this only later, near the end of the film, when we see the rape sequence's concluding images, which reveal the victim. It is hard to be sure if we are intended to regard Adina's monologue as giving expression to Choco's violation, figuring as a kind of *de facto* narration of it, or as subordinating and overwriting it with her own story. The ambiguity deepens the more closely Adina's monologue is considered.

"Mirrors" begins by relating something like the Lacanian mirror stage, in which Adina recognises her own image as the foundation of her identity, but one alienated from itself because it is recognised as other than the desirable white male

image. This might remind us of Choco's self-examination in the mirror and suggest the monologue's relation to his rape is part of a larger system through which it gives voice to moments in the film which are otherwise unarticulated, particularly as the events from her life which Adina recounts are illustrated by scenes from the Bolivian stories. Adina's voice, one historically positioned as other within the West, may become a narrator of otherness and its vicissitudes, speaking the experience of another culture alienated by globalisation.

However, it can perform this function only unwittingly. Further, this voice given to the Third World other is formed in the West, and not one it would have chosen for itself, certainly in Choco's case, and most likely for the other Bolivians. The appearance of Adina's monologue as the voice of otherness is problematic for another reason. When the monologue resumes after Choco is exposed as the rape victim, we see it is in fact being rehearsed for a theatre piece, and so does not necessarily recount anyone's actual history. Adina is not even Adina; her voice is that of Maxine, the actress playing the character "Adina" in "Mirrors," a play within something called "Sexual Dependency Monologues."

If Choco's rape appears as the illustration of Adina's monologue, the monologue fails to adhere to it, producing a disconnection or disjunction that is—given the two characters do not even meet—impersonal, generalised and irremediable. Their experiences of exclusion are incommensurable, precluding some mutually communicable experience of difference even as they seem to imply it. The effect is that Choco is, in a way, raped twice over, literally by the homophobic jocks and then figuratively by their diametrical opposite, an articulate black woman, as if an American society divided into polar extremes shares only an instinct to spot and use the outsider to advance its own stories. This "instinct" is unconscious in the sense that it lies outside character. Its logic must be found in the film's structure, and the global order that it implies through the relations between its component narratives. The shape of this order emerges when we consider the social context implicit in the two American stories as a kind of benchmark against which to relate the film's narratives.

The American stories evoke the form of a monoculture paradoxically characterised by omnipresent decentralised antagonisms following the reshaping of social life as a battlefield through the culture wars. Characters appear subsumed in some formalised group identity—the jock, the black feminist, the queer—negatively differentiated by the object of their hostility, usually sexual, rather than characterised by some distinctive collective life. These reified identities are not really essential to character, so that, for instance, Tyler finds his way to a campus gay group only to vaguely drift through the room while its members perform group rituals—the drag act, the coming out drama—in a mode of habituated camp. This is not conventionally conceived alienation, which might have seemed an adequate diagnosis of the Bolivian characters' condition if the film had presented them solely in terms of their own narratives.

Set against the American stories, the Bolivian ones present a society in which the vestigial remnants of traditional structures are being hollowed out by the advanced capitalism already fully realised in the West. When we see how the lives of Santa Cruz' privileged teenagers revolve around displaying



themselves in a kind of fashion show at the local Burger King, this suggests the reconfiguring of venerable adolescent behaviours around consumption and media-proffered images, in an embryonic form of the asocial relations of the American subnarratives. Apart from this artificially isolated, vacuous world for the few, the bulk of the characters in the Bolivian stories remain locked in what is no "real" or "natural" life lost to the West but a society riven by overt class tensions and brutalised by patriarchy. Bellot depicts a harsh order in which you either trek on foot through the dirt or cruise by in an SUV, riding above or toiling below, with nothing in between.

While the American subnarratives offer a template against which the social context of the Bolivian stories is explicated, those stories can in turn frame an understanding of seemingly contingent aspects of the American subnarratives—such as Choco's fall from privilege or the jocks' compulsive homophobia—in essential and systemic terms. This would see values and power realities contiguous to those which rule in Bolivia as prevailing in America too and only masked behind commodified images which simulate looser forms of social organisation and personal identity. With no definitive break between these two societies, both the film's American and Bolivian characters manifest hybrid identities, formed by still operant coercive traditional forces and simultaneously reordered by capitalism, most obviously through its unreal marketing images which permeate all experience in the film.

These complications effected by *Sexual Dependency*'s multiple narrative structure do not produce a determinate specification of "the global system." Rather, the image of America as a society liberated from material hardship and sexual strictures comes to appear as the fantasy which the film's Latin American teenagers are being made to act out. This fantasy stands in stark contrast not just to the reality of Westernisation, but the reality of the West presented in the American stories. What the film depicts is not globalisation or Americanisation as usually conceived, but the effect of a radical acceleration of basic processes of capitalism, such as social antagonism and commodification, operating across the globe in ways at once local and systematic.

The resulting relation between West and Rest is consistent with the film's title: a dependency which could be called sexual. It is clearly not emotional, as the Western model is followed by the Bolivian teens without apparent love, hate or even awareness, nor is the dependency simply economic, as part of what is at work is a desire for the image of the West. This desire is sexual in that it results in the image of the West investing and penetrating non-Western bodies. And it brings dependency because it is desire as lack—lack of the proffered ideal image, which feeds on pre-existing forms of desire as lack, such as patriarchy.

The coordination of conditions in the West and Rest is not only implicit in narrative relations between the film's American and Bolivian substories. It also appears embodied, in a billboard for the ubiquitous RIGO BosD underwear that sits on an intersection passed by each character in the Bolivian stories and whose advertising image featuring Tyler we see produced in 'Angels and Billboards.'⁴

As key events in the film play out in one screen image, the billboard regularly recurs in the other like a silent witness, almost a subject, presiding over all the film's action. From its

appearance in the opening sequence—occupying both screen images, across one of which steps a trousered and well-heeled leg while a coloured foot falls, sandalled and bare, into the other—it is also a consistent sign of racial, class and economic divisions, which its recurrences associate with the content of the film's narratives.

While images fill the absences in social relations and desire in the American subnarratives, in Bolivia, the billboard is an overt physical presence, functioning as a kind of master image orchestrating the remaking of Latin American bodies and so representing a literal, physical Western control over the materiality of the Third World. Yet while the billboard is an ordering sign, in that sexual and economic power and identity flow around it, it does not have a clear regulating function. It instances how capitalism does not so much create its own meanings as opportunistically correlate itself with pre-existing ones to enter them into exchange.

Relating the American subnarrative in which we see the billboard image produced to the Bolivian ones places the billboard at the intersection of a system of desire with a system of power, as part of a global organisation which fuses power and desire. Implicitly, *Sexual Dependency* ties the reorganisation of social conflicts within the West around identity politics to the process whereby capitalism has, through globalisation, not so much been projected outward as assumed a new world scale. One consequence is that the tensions surrounding sexuality pervading the American stories cannot be simply psychologised, because we see them channelled into production of the billboard, an instrument of cultural power over the Third World. And, viewing the same dynamic from the "other" Third World perspective, if issues like sexual freedom—of which the billboard offers a false image—seem to give content to Westernisation, its reality is the propagation across the globe of economic relations which are veiled behind such content.

The angry, ideological content of Adina's narrative is also a product of Western identity politics and colonises Choco's experience much as the billboard dominates the lives of the Bolivian characters. But the film shows this process is not deliberate or personal, as the Western identities involved are political and socialised. The black woman's voice and white boy's homosexual desire, which are repressed and displaced in the West, come to rest attached to a materiality that is not their own but is similarly construed as other (the material of Third World bodies), overlaying it with their disembodied, dislocated image (Tyler in the billboard) or voice (Adina's narrative superimposed on Choco's rape). They can do this because the Third World other is deprived of its own voice and self-image, as Choco is in America.

This suggests a larger context for the failure of the Adina narrative to relate to the Bolivian characters, one which would focus on the form, rather than the content, of the relation between them. It would see that form as an effect of the structurally and stylistically fragmented world of the film, which mirrors that of contemporary capitalism. Within both, a voice like Adina's must attach itself to an unstable flow of images and bodies which have been uprooted from established systems of signification and entered into motion (in the case of the film, through its split screen and overlapping narratives) or exchange (in reality). The attachment of nar-

tive structure to these flows can only be provisional and opportunistic. Adina's monologue can thus seem to speak of some broader Bolivian experience, but without implying the objective conditions of the marginalised in the First and Third Worlds are in any way similar or even related. It may reflect only the disordering of the stable reference any act of communication requires for expression and experience to cohere, which results in narratives of difference, just as much as of sameness, appearing at once generalised and faulted.

An analogous challenge is made to the thematic cogency of the film itself by its freewheeling style. The rapid-fire imagery, often without dialogue or explicit narrative function and held together by fleeting moods coerced by generic pop songs, seems a self-aware pastiche of advertising, reality television and music videos, exaggerated by Bellot's over-ready indulgence of fashionable stylistic devices. One effect, which is intentional, is to evoke a social reality in which an omnipresence of images overlays bodies and cultures to dissolve and fragment them. Another, though, is to place any structures of meaning in the film under the same pressure from its own imagery, which invites forms of association that undermine its narrative logic. *Sexual Dependency* risks falling victim to the tendency for style to overwhelm substance, which might mark the reading of the contemporary capitalist order that it can sustain as accidental, if not inconsistent, given this tendency is part of that order.

This state of affairs leaves open two possibilities. First, it does not prevent inference of what Jameson calls "the referent" of a text, such as Adina's narrative or the film itself, which is not its meaning but "the limit of its meanings, and of their historical preconditions, and of what is and must remain incommensurable with individual expression."⁵ Jameson likens this to an absent cause which is implied as the determining form of contemporary experience and which, though it cannot be represented explicitly in a text, can find figures through which to express itself in distorted ways.⁶ For the experiences represented in the film, this absent cause is the power implied by Adina's narrative and Choco's fate, not in their content but through the form of their conjunction (or disjunction), which relates sexual subjugation to racial and cultural outside of the fictions of national and personal identity. The film can be read as implicating without identifying this referent, even if it does so unsatisfactorily and is overwhelmed by its subject and style (which may be seen as a consequence of the referent's unrepresentable presence).

Secondly, even if a fictional narrative such as Adina's (or the film itself) cannot reveal the reality of experience outside the dominant order, it may create alternate possibilities for such experience in the uncoded interstices of the social and personal formations produced by power. Something like this may occur when Adina's monologue resumes after we have seen Choco exposed as the rape victim. Aligned with her recalling that, after her rape, she saw herself reflected in the mirror and laughed, we see those earlier moments of vacancy involving the film's other characters reprised. It may be that these instances of experience outside the homogenised image of teenage life can in fact be served by a single narrative, precisely because they are moments of absence, though this depends on seeing difference not as a thing in itself, awaiting articulation, but as coming into being with its articulation.

The film does not achieve such an articulation; at most, it implies the existence of spaces in which this might occur.

Sexual Dependency's conclusion presents its characters in a sequence which suggests they share (or attempts to create for them) heterogeneous but inter-communicating experiences of exclusion, though the suggestion is not fully convincing. To a loudly melancholy musical accompaniment, we move from Choco raped and swearing to Sebastian vomiting just after his encounter with the prostitute. There is another shot of the billboard's mute watching presence as Jessica next appears, also vomiting (perhaps pregnant). We see Sean watch Tyler complete the by now heavy-handed epidemic of vomiting, they exchange a final ambiguous look and the film ends with Jessica and Tyler expressionless, the Bolivian and American aware of their own exclusion but not of each other, aligned on screen in separate close-ups.

The film's conclusion may seem an unsatisfactory representation of its character's predicament, but this is the only representation such a predicament can have. Our sense of something failing to come to expression or being blocked reflects both the situation of this generation—at a stage prior to voicing its resistance, so that only its oppression can be represented—and of the film itself, whose drive to capture the complex interactions of American and Bolivian experience reduces to presenting the lowest common denominator of contemporary life, its excess of gross materiality.

Apart from any meaning that might be read into *Sexual Dependency*'s concluding montage, the experience common to its characters is one of abjection. It is as if they expel the excess forced into them—of images, peer pressure, sexualisation, violence. That this is only a mechanical bodily reflex makes it the culmination of the processes whereby materiality overwhelms signification: character is effaced by body, the economic overwhelms the social and cultural, the film as narrative is swamped by the film as visual medium, the Third World body—Choco—reappears as a residual outside systems of meaning like Adina's narrative or the homosocial order of "Angels and Billboards." The material excess which *Sexual Dependency*'s characters cannot absorb also appears beyond the system of power which the film can only infer as the source of their common condition. Never fully articulated in the film, or anywhere else, this system remains determinate yet unrepresentable—and open.

Michael Sofair lives in Sydney, Australia. He has had various review articles published in *Film Quarterly*.

Notes

- 1 *The Jameson Reader*, ed. M. Hardt and K. Weeks, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, 312.
- 2 Ibid, 336.
- 3 Ibid, 200.
- 4 The billboard also figures in another story, outside the film. The director had it mounted at an intersection in Santa Cruz and a related website promptly began receiving inquiries about manufacturing rights for the underwear (whose name joins that of the production company for *Sexual Dependency*, BosD, with what may be an abbreviation for Bellot's first name, Rodrigo). In effect inserting themselves into the film's flow of images, the filmmakers may acknowledge the problematic nature of presuming a stable position outside a "reality" which is increasingly contrived for commercial exchange.
- 5 Ibid, 110.
- 6 Ibid, 27.

REVIEWS

Bruce McDonald on the West Coast

THE LOVE CRIMES OF GILLIAN GUESS (CANADA 2004)

BY GEORGE MELNYK

What a pleasure to finally see a new feature from Bruce McDonald! After the aborted *Claire's Hat* (2001) McDonald again takes on a female hero in his exploration of the dangerous contradictions that inform public consciousness. *The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess* played the Canadian film festival circuit in 2004 and in 2005 is doing the international circuit prior to wider release. Whether the film will get to the next stage (the art house market) is the big question. If it does, it will be almost 10 years since the theatrical release of his last feature—the engaging music mockumentary, *Hard Core Logo*.

At a Vancouver murder trial in the mid-1990s a female juror named Gillian Guess caused a scandal (and committed a crime) while serving on the jury, when she had an affair with the accused, Peter Gill. He was later acquitted. Angus Fraser, who was a co-screenwriter on Lynne Stokewich's 1996 debut drama *Kissed*, has written an amazing script, which, in McDonald's skillful hands, seamlessly weaves together a variety of film genres—comedy, animation, drama and even the musical. The result is a totally unconventional, utterly surrealistic, postmodern frolic that makes it difficult for normal audiences to suspend their disbelief. My favourite image from the film is the magnificent blush red, disembodied lips that fill the screen like a moving work of pop art. This new film is a stylistic leap for McDonald that keeps the audience involved intellectually rather than emotionally, though there are a number of good laughs. He uses comedy to deconstruct our precious sense of reality.

On the surface the film portrays Gillian Guess (Joely Collins) defending her actions in the arena of public opinion, when she appears on a television

celebrity talk-show. Bobby Tomahawk (Hugh Dillon) plays the vampirish host and his studio audience is filled with sari-dressed Indo-Canadian women. Intercut with scenes from her brutally sarcastic television interrogation are scenes from the trial itself. Since television is not allowed to record trials, McDonald stages the trial as a Perry Mason courtroom drama, in which he makes us aware of its complete artificiality. Added to this thread are various flashbacks to Guess's childhood and coming-of-age adventures and scenes of her single parent life with her own two daughters. As a result there are at least four realities at play in the film, as well as other sequences that fantasize her developing relationship with the accused and an animated narration of the killing itself presented by the prosecutor, which turns into a cartoon, comic-book account.

McDonald's film is an outstanding piece of social criticism, a satire on the justice system, but more importantly, a pointed attack on the media and television and its polarizing culture of good guys and bad guys. In a number of scenes in the film old American television crime programs appear, mirroring the current narrative with their own clichés. The programs themselves point to the stereotypical characterization that determines public morality, social consciousness and allowable discourse. That most of this influence is American only adds insult to injury. Gillian Guess appears throughout the film dressed as a kind of American Barbie Doll figure, a cultural product that fantasizes the female persona as a sexual object and an icon of beauty. When a real female uses this culturally-created power in her interests, McDonald tells us, she is pilloried as the



she-devil, the evil *femme fatale* that society must expunge. McDonald has already played with this theme in *Highway 61*, when his female protagonist changes her hair colour to red (the same colour code now used by Ms. Guess in her dress) and turns the patriarchal world upside down by taking charge.

"It's all made up like a movie," the Peter Gill character tells Gillian as he tries to convince her of his innocence. The



theme of make-believe continues when the film repeats a schoolroom scene in which the teacher asks Gillian the difference between dream and fantasy. She knows what a dream is but fantasy is something she cannot describe because she lives it. Her reality is fantasy, as it is for most of us, who are willing to acknowledge the world of our dreamed, subjective selves. In our fantasy life we become characters in our own movie

drama, playing roles that have been taught us by visual entertainment. This would seem to be McDonald's central message. In fact, whatever narrative characterization and seemingly genuine dramatization does occur in the film is found only in flashbacks and re-creations. The events at the trial and in the television studio display a Gillian Guess persona that is acted out in a consciously artificial way. McDonald has Joely Collins

use sexual retorts, cross and re-cross her silky legs, strut on stage, make salacious gestures at the lawyers etc. that present Guess as a conventionally lewd character and not a real person.

McDonald is asking the audience to see themselves as the typical morally superior judge, jury and executioner, whose social values and roles are programmed in the same way that fast-food is consumed—quickly and cheaply (fast-

food containers appear throughout the film). The ads that appear with the talk-show are wonderful anti-ads that make fun of marketing as the life-blood of the sterile consumer society. The host, Bobby Tomahawk, describes himself as "the everyday man" who demands a primitive, vigilante justice. The mob must have its pound of flesh for the sake of entertainment. In the everyday world celebrity status must be paid for with suffering. "I acted for love," Gillian claims, "and they crucified me!"

Gill and Guess are Adam and Eve, who in one scene are placed in a primordial west coast rain forest to emulate the Garden of Eden. They both proclaim their innocence before a system that plays with them by simultaneously glorifying and denouncing sexuality. (He gets away with it but she doesn't). The film suggests that all crime involves love rather than just hate and that love can make us criminals if we don't follow social taboos. The film attacks the media's distinction between good and evil and presents their affair as an affront to the stage-managed world of the justice system. That the whole thing is presented using the clichéd characters of grade-B genre films only adds to its artistic conceit.

McDonald has discovered in the Gillian Guess story an absurdist world that can be exploited for effect. He has created a self-referential film that talks about the contemporary language of the media-constructed mythologies that we live in everyday, mythologies that are little different from the narratives created during a time when public executions of petty criminals were attended by hundreds or thousands of cheering spectators. *The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess* is the work of a powerful talent, who has entered his mature phase. The film is a creative success that elevates Canadian cinema, but like so much Canadian cinema, its popular appeal is limited. The lack of narrative closure (a poor ending), the sophistication of the film's self-conscious imagery and symbolism, and its disjointed story-line make it a challenge to the average viewer. But then again, why should McDonald pander to low or middle-brow narrative conventions in film and television? He's much smarter doing what he does best—creating delightful, thought-provoking parodies of cinema itself. Is that a crime? I don't think so. To me this film is an act of love.

C.R.A.Z.Y.

BY GEORGE MELNYK

C.R.A.Z.Y. by auteur director Jean-Marc Vallée was the sleeper Quebec hit of 2005. It was selected as Canada's official entry at the 2006 Oscars for Best Foreign Film, but it wasn't nominated. Therein lies the rub. While Quebec was embracing the film enthusiastically, the film's international (including English Canadian) acceptance was limited even though it won the prize for the best Canadian feature at the Toronto International Film Festival in the fall of 2005 and then Best Film and Best Director at the Genies in March 2006. The film was released in DVD a few weeks later. Compared to Denys Arcand's *The Barbarian Invasions* of a few years ago, which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* represented another dimension of Quebec culture—one that was more claustrophobic, insular, and self-contained. While Arcand's film represented the globalized (the film begins in London) and continentalized Quebec of the 21st century, Vallée's film never leaves the confines of Montreal, except at the end when its hero travels to North Africa to find himself, before returning to his Quebec roots.

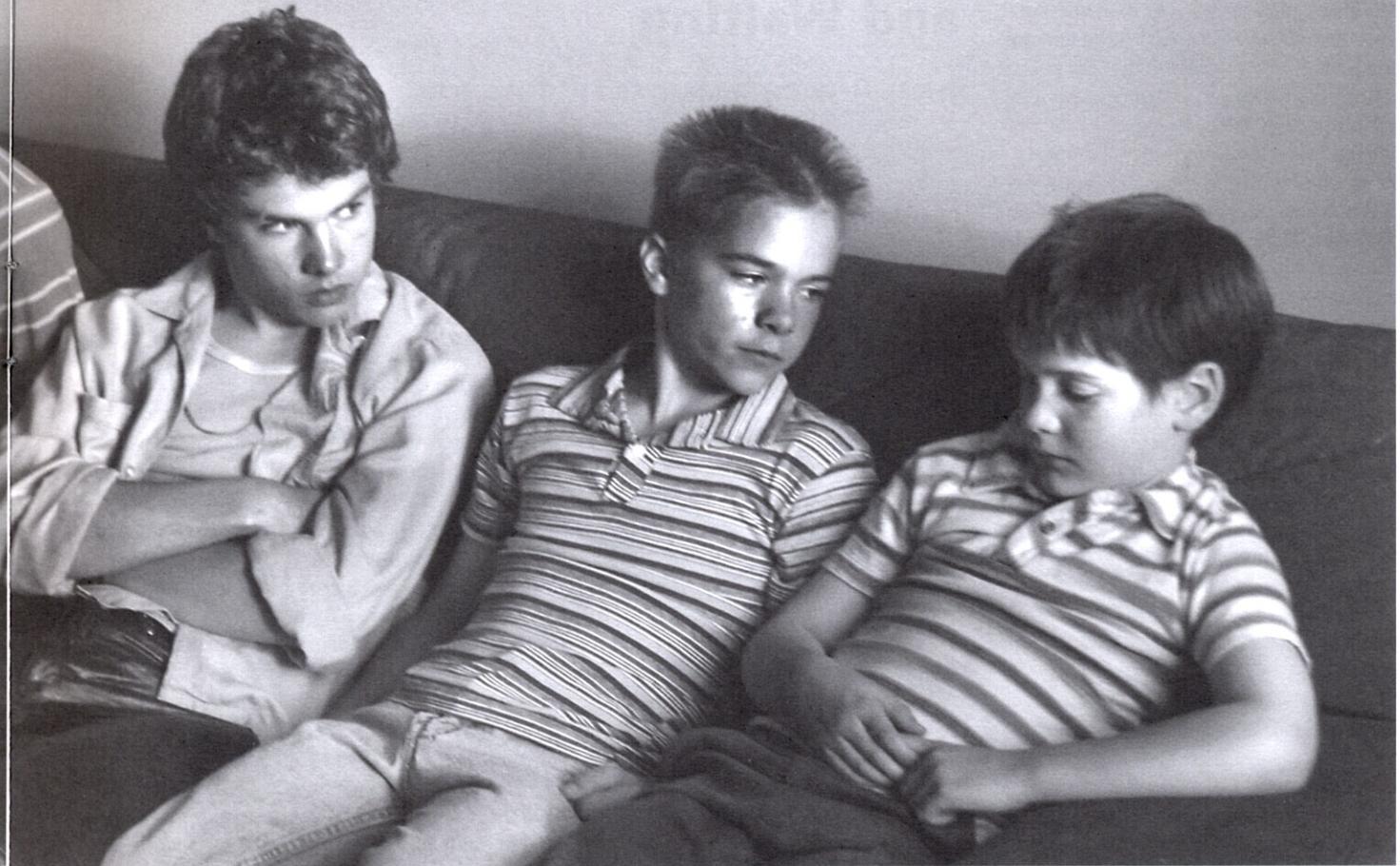
Spanning the years from 1960 to 1980, the film is a coming-of-age saga of a gay youth trapped in the confines of working-class francophone society. This is precisely the period in which Quebec underwent historical changes, first with the Quiet Revolution and then the government of the Parti Québécois, which lost the first sovereignty referendum in 1980. While the story may have symbolic ties to the general outline of socio-political change (progress is achieved in the end), the film itself is lost in the depths of a private family crisis and how a homophobic father is reconciled with his son's sexual orientation.

Of late Quebec cinema has undergone an incredible renaissance to which *C.R.A.Z.Y.* has contributed. In 2005 Quebec films earned 26 per cent of that province's box office. In 2004 it was 21 per cent. In 2003 it was 15 per cent. These are historic highs. In the 1990s, when Quebec films occasionally reached



10 per cent of box office, there was reason to celebrate because this was double the norm. In comparison, the box office for English-Canadian films in Canada was a paltry 1.6 per cent in 2004 and only 1.2 per cent in 2005. Historic melodramas (*Aurore*) set in rural Quebec have been a fundamental part of the phenomenon. There is now less dependence on the comedy factor of the *Les Boys* series, which were a big contributor to attendance in the 1990s. The end result is that Quebec films have been a financial hit at home and an artistic hit at the Genies for the past few years. Even when they competed against Cronenberg, Egoyan and Mehta this year they won.

C.R.A.Z.Y. is part of a wider Canadian phenomenon in which English Canadian cinema has failed to make inroads in terms of audience, while its Quebec twin has consolidated and expanded its cultural acceptance on its home turf. This acceptance has led to a significant increase in budgets for Quebec films. For example, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* had a budget of \$7 million, featuring soundtracks from The



Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, David Bowie and Charles Aznavour. In the 1990s such a budget would have been considered an extraordinary extravagance in most cases.

While the film's popularity is evident in its grossing over \$5 million in Quebec box office, its artistic achievement is more of an issue. It certainly doesn't measure up to the amazing accomplishment that was Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo* in 1992. While that film looked at family life from the perspective of a disturbed adolescent filled with surreal fantasies, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* dips into the same stream of consciousness but rather than using the poetic language, surrealist imagery, and disturbing music of Lauzon's masterpiece, it seldom strays from overt realism and catchy narrative. The occasional magic realism sequences in church or the beatific mirage in the desert are a bow to *Léolo*, but the main storyline deals primarily with mistaken impressions and false interpretations that highlight the confused and traumatic nature of father/son and mother/son relationships. In *Léolo* the viewer's breath is taken away by the

audacity of some narrative episodes, but in *C.R.A.Z.Y.* the viewer quietly nods in bemused agreement with the portrayal of sibling rivalry and the general mayhem of family life. With *C.R.A.Z.Y.* we are several notches down the aesthetic ladder, and that may very well be a factor in its popularity.

The three main characters are Zachary Beaulieu (Michel Côté, who won Best Actor at the Genies for this role), the son who needs to come out of the family closet; his authoritarian, blue-collar father played by Marc-André Grondin and his empathetic mother played by Danielle Proulx, who won Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Outside this triumvirate are four brothers (the first letter of each of their names plus Zach's adds up to *C.R.A.Z.Y.*) who play stereotypical characters—the brainy nerd, the prodigal son drug addict, etc. The basic inspiration for this tragi-comedy lies in its harking back (this film is an exercise in nostalgia) to the mythic, fictional Plouffe family that dates back to radio and television series in the 1950s and 60s. Family as a pillar of

Quebec identity is part of the family-religion-language-land quartet associated with traditional francophone identity. Vallée plays with this very well, using the coming-of-age motif to show the transition from the old value system to the newer universe of today in which diversity is the norm.

There is some entertaining symbolism in the film, such as the Patsy Cline LP that is the father's treasure, which gets broken by Zach, who then finds a replacement in some flea market in North Africa, after his father denounces him for his sexual orientation. The broken record is a sign of a broken relationship that needs to be repaired. The Cline LP is also contrasted with his father's delight in lip-synching a famous Charles Aznavour song every Christmas. The European and American roots of Quebec identity are perfectly summarized in this musical contest—how Quebec loves both. Likewise the phallic symbolism of exchanging smokes is played up, as is the key element of the automobile as a bonding agent between father and son.

But these obvious symbols are not enough to raise the film beyond its middle-of-the-road appeal and its sentimental underpinnings. What sustains the film are the period sets, the costuming and hair styles, the up-tempo, instantly recognizable music, and the portrayal of easily identifiable characters with universal appeal.

It would be remiss not to discuss the theme of homosexuality, which provides the tension and dramatic movement of the film. With *Brokeback Mountain* receiving such accolades in the U.S. for bringing a gay love story, also set in a similar period, to a mainstream audience, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*'s treatment of gay sexuality requires comment. Compared to *Brokeback Mountain*, which deals explicitly with adult gay sex, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* views gay sexuality as a psychological struggle or as one element in a multiple universe of family problems. *Brokeback Mountain* deals with gay sex in a mature and groundbreaking way. *C.R.A.Z.Y.* because it is a coming-of-age story only suggests gay sex.

C.R.A.Z.Y. is a heart-warming, feel-good drama but not much more. In terms of Quebec box-office in 2005 it came in behind the latest *Harry Potter* and the latest *Star Wars* release. That is the company in which it belongs—mass entertainment. Simon Beaudry, president of Cineac, the firm that compiles box office figures for Quebec is quoted in *Variety* (Jan. 4, 2006) as saying that "what Quebec filmmakers are producing is exactly what the public wants." One can't argue with that because box office doesn't lie when it comes to popularity contests. But the *vox populi* may not be a good measure of quality. As the Quebec market grows for home-grown cinema and English Canada looks on enviously from the margins of public acceptance, the latest crop of Quebec films like *C.R.A.Z.Y.* may very well exude curb appeal in Quebec but their significance has to be judged more modestly. Receiving the Golden Reel Award at the Genies for highest grossing Canadian film (\$6.2 million nation-wide) tells only one side of the *C.R.A.Z.Y.* equation. The other side, which deals with a critical assessment, provides a less euphoric result.

George Melnyk is Associate Professor, Canadian Studies and Film Studies, Faculty of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary.

Reading, Regarding, and Waiting

THREE NEW DOCUMENTARIES FROM NOVA SCOTIA

BY DARRELL VARGA

Three new documentaries screened at the 2005 Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax evoke the saliency of place amidst the global flow of culture in distinct and compelling ways. *Regarding: Cohen* (Dir: Lesley Ann Patten) begins with images of the street protests from the December 2004 George W. Bush visit to Halifax. The images are familiar and, as always, evocative: a mass of ordinary people standing up to this figure of injustice. Yet the relentlessness of the Bush war machine mark these images, at least for me, as bittersweet and that is the feeling conveyed on the face of the film's subject, activist lawyer Lee Cohen. Bush visited Halifax to promote Canadian involvement in the Ballistic Missile Defence plan as well as to affirm the continued militarization of the Halifax harbour (a frequent port for American military and nuclear vessels). Cohen's face is grim, as if resigned to the necessity of street protest in the face of the intransigence of political power, but we hear his voice articulating the moral responsibility we have to disobey unjust laws—as measured by the simple but not simplistic rule that laws degrading human beings are unjust. Near the conclusion of this film, we revisit these same protest images but the meaning is fundamentally transformed by what we have seen. We now understand that the film's subject has come to the protest for affirmation, to know that there are others, many others, who believe in alternatives to the present system of inequity, war, and misery.

Lee Cohen represents people seeking asylum before the Refugee Board of Canada, where hearings are increasingly held by teleconference, meaning that the person facing deportation may never see the political appointee deciding his or her fate. The vast majority of applicants are displaced by war, famine, and poverty—the effects of military aggression and the inequities of global capitalism. Cohen describes the refugee process as the wild-

west of the legal system because the decision to refuse asylum can lead to the death of the applicant upon return to his or her country of origin. It is a system managed by political appointees with no particular expertise in the issues at hand, overdetermined by the dominant ideology originating in the United States, an ideology of security hysteria and fear of the other, and where individual lives are caught up in the shifting currents of political expediency rather than compassion. Indeed, ethnicity has always been a prime factor in Canadian immigration policy from the racist policies toward Chinese labourers at the foundation of Canada, internment camps during WWII, the Mackenzie King government's "none is too many" policy toward Jews, to the current ideological hysteria. This historical context, in which Canada plays lap-dog to American imperialist ambitions is the context for the film which follows, in *vérité* style, Cohen's impassioned efforts on behalf of his clients.

The cases that we see unfold are lived effects of policy: a Russian sailor and (former navy colonel) who flees the slave *sans wage* working conditions of Russian gangster capitalism is refused refugee status in spite of evidence that he will be attacked by the Russian mob for testifying about, among other things, his ship's illegal fishing practices off the coast of Canada. The case is a powerful example both of how national economic concerns and individual compassion are sacrificed with the realignment of global capital. The second case detailed in the film is even more striking in this regard: A Kosovar refugee, whose status as refugee is an outcome of Canadian involvement in the 78 day NATO bombings in the former Yugoslavia, is refused status and takes sanctuary in a Halifax church for over a year. Only after sustained efforts on behalf of a large community of activists is she final able to gain her freedom—and this is the key to the film's



Reading Alistair MacLeod



importance, for while it focuses on the work of the activist lawyer who is also the film's narrator, it avoids hagiography in return for a demonstration of the commitment of community. That is the lesson of the return to the image of protest in *Regarding: Cohen*, how collective activism is the bulwark against the forces of militarized imperialism. Canadian immigration policy is greatly influenced by the increasingly xenophobic American security policies and it is the specificity of activism at the local level represented in this film that demonstrates the intersection of community with the machinations of global power. It also articulates the importance of actually exercising human rights in a country that continues to claim protection of human rights.

After Frank (Dir: Walter Forsyth) is not a film explicitly about politics; rather it is about the global flow of culture, in this case from the New York art scene to rural Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia via the work of iconoclastic photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank, famous for his seminal book *The Americans*, his relationship with the Beat writers, and for his transformative influence on contemporary media artists. Halifax filmmaker

Walter Forsyth chases after the notoriously reclusive Frank to make his film, waiting outside his home by the ocean, flying to London to try to meet him at the opening of an exhibit, and finally, at the film's conclusion, arriving at the door of his New York loft where the artist remains off-camera and politely declines to participate in the film. While every indie filmmaker wants to make a film with the impact of Frank's seminal *Pull My Daisy* (with Alfred Leslie and Jack Kerouac, 1959), the implication of Forsyth's film is the necessity of the "after," of the making of new work rather than lapsing into nostalgia for the innovations of acclaimed artists. Likewise, Frank has consistently refused guru status, or to respond to critical exegesis of his highly influential work, preferring to say that the work speaks for itself.

The filmmaker, however, begins by drawing an analogy between Frank and his own father, who is frail and may not live to see the completed film. With understated irony, Forsyth the good son even rents a mower to cut the overgrown grass around Frank's Cape Breton house with the hope that the gesture will win him favour. On the way to this location, the film crew picks up a nineteen

year-old female hitchhiker, on the road to Toronto ostensibly to launch a filmmaking career, and Forsyth suggests that her presence may soften the repose of the stern father-figure subject. Intercut with these scenes of pursuit is commentary referring to the cantankerous artist subject, described in one instance as having the worst qualities of his Swiss upbringing and New York career: arrogance and toughness—lacking the "politeness" of Canadians. The documentary circulates around the identity of the subject but his elusiveness turns the film onto the experience of the filmmaker, an experience of waiting and watching. He is the good son of the fictional father, and in this narrative conceit the film manages to incorporate Robert Frank's concise artist statement, cited in the film: "The truth is somewhere between the documentary and the fictional." The Robert Frank we are not shown in the film, but nevertheless come to know through Forsyth's process of waiting, is someone who has broken the rules of artistic convention and forsaken cult status so that others may likewise be unbothered to the dominant ideological trajectory.

The tensions between past and present, the local and the global, of writing

and speaking, are the guiding themes of *Reading Alistair MacLeod* (Dir: William D. MacGillivray), a portrait of the influential Cape Breton author. MacLeod relates how, when in New York for a literary event, someone reads his nametag and exclaims: "I thought you were dead!" MacLeod slyly explains that no, he just moved back to Canada. The anecdote raises the question of presence and value in relation to hegemonic forces of cultural power, which in turn relates to the presence of place in the writer's imagination in the context of the persistent political and economic marginality of this region. Indeed, many of MacLeod's stories are about people who leave home to find work elsewhere, and upon return find themselves at the margins of belonging and alienation. The film is structured through a series of readings of moving passages from MacLeod's stories by his family, and by prominent authors such as Margaret Atwood, Russell Banks, Lisa Moore and others. MacLeod describes his work as striving for the storytelling tradition of a pre-literate era, particularly drawing from his Gaelic heritage.

Atwood affirms how writing on the page is akin to musical notation brought to life in the performative act of storytelling. Likewise, we see footage of the process of adapting a MacLeod story into opera by Canadian composer Christopher Donison while in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts. In this way, the written story is made strange but also renewed, at the same time that the author's recurring subject is the erosion of tradition and the meaning of place with the onslaught of modernization. Throughout the film, we learn about an artist's work by coming to know other artists. MacLeod is situated in a broader milieu and in this way we are brought to multiple understandings of place while also invited to find our own way.

There is nothing that is new that is also not shaped by loss, but if these stories evoke memorialization they are by no means nostalgic. The passage from "The Boat," MacLeod's first published story (1968), read by Lisa Moore, makes this clear:

And it is not an easy thing to know that your mother looks upon the sea with love and on you with bitterness because the one has been so constant

and the other so untrue.

But neither is it easy to know that your father was found on November twenty-eighth, ten miles to the north and wedged between two boulders at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs where he had been hurled and slammed so many many times. His hands were shredded ribbons, as were his feet which had lost their boots to the suction of the sea, and his shoulders came apart in our hands when we tried to move him from the rocks.

The prose evokes the fragility of life echoed in *Regarding: Cohen*, but here it is the ruthlessness of geography rather than the callousness of political institutions that one is set against. The body of the father, as in *After Frank*, is dissolving into air. In all three films, however, the social space through which action occurs is determined by narrative, whether of the political systemization of migration, the canonical tendencies of the artworld, or in the function of story in relation to landscape—itself situated with respect to economy, patterns of migration, and concepts of value. Lisa Moore makes the point that it is impossible to be nostalgic about these images; rather, this is the narrative of globalization, that the capital accumulated and traded upon in centres of power such as New York City is made on the backs of the twin exploitation of regional resources and working-class labour. This story is not set in a distant past (in spite of the mythic resonance of the prose); rather, it is the articulation of the process of work and the making of meaning in the contemporary context of change and economic uncertainty.

Early in the film MacLeod describes his process of creating stories out of the specificity of character and situation. This straightforward statement can be understood as referential to the documentary film, but can also serve as a kind of manifesto for director MacGillivray's approach to dramatic narrative, for instance in his seminal film *Life Classes* (1987). The saliency of realism in both MacLeod and MacGillivray's work echoes Raymond Williams's insistence that this form is politically vital precisely because it is grounded in the materiality of experience (and in turn the development of class consciousness) whereby, as he states: "it is necessary to describe...an environment if we wish to understand a character,

since character and environment are indissolubly linked."¹ While straightforward, this perspective is by no means simplistic; instead, it becomes the means to articulate a subject's relation to place and the navigation of the process of modernization.

Irish Writer Colm Toibin articulates the vitality of these stories, working with what he calls "that old material...my four grandparents are buried in the same graveyard. I know what graves have space left in them. And all the family is there. I'm from there. But I live *here*." This relation to place, one of simultaneous belonging and alienation, of how we can be both attached to landscape while also disconnected provides insight to the experiences of memory, migration and exile. The writing and the film come together in one of the final images, a shot of the ocean, grey except for a few reflected bands of light from the rising sun, as Toibin compares MacLeod's writing to painting: "It could be very grey, abstract...you wouldn't get any notion where the beauty was." It is nonetheless beautiful beyond the frame of language while grounded in the necessary rhythms of the everyday. That image mirrors an important shot in *After Frank*, a view of the ocean in front of Frank's home, substituting for the presence of the film's subject. What is important, however, is the filmmaker's process through which this place is given meaning, and in this way it shares a conceptual space with *Regarding: Cohen*, where the social landscape is made by human action, though not under conditions of our own choosing.

With thanks to Andrew Murphy and the Atlantic Film Festival.

Darrell Varga is Canada Research Chair in Contemporary Film and Media Studies at NSCAD University (the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) in Halifax.

NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, "Realism, Naturalism, and Their Alternatives," in *Explorations in Film Theory: Selected Essays from Ciné-Tracts*, ed. Ron Burnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 121. My thanks to Peter Urquhart for drawing this article to my attention. While I am conflating Williams's use of naturalism and realism, I am affirming his perspective, drawn from Marx, that the realist depiction of the environment is important because the view of place can thus shift to include subordinated perspectives.

Some Directions in World Cinema

AFI FEST 2005

54th International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg

7th Scandinavian Film Festival L.A.

BY DIANE SIPPL

New Windows

One of the most pervasive tendencies in filmmaking observable in the festival circuit this year has also been one of the most important ones, and one hardly likely to disappear. With globalization has come an internationalization of film production that takes new turns every day.

As young independents study abroad at film schools, labs and workshops, as they compete to attend international co-production meetings to find partners and funds, and as they return home to make their first features with cast and crew from a variety of countries, more than the glamorous and commercially

exploitive Hollywood-style location shooting is taking place. New themes, forms, and styles are filling our screens, and for the most logical reasons they encompass the predicament of being "at home among strangers, a stranger at home." It's as if the newest lenses have been jumping into the world hopper, and given a good whirl, are landing in places they've never quite seen before and, with new technologies, are tapping skills and resources they never imagined. In any event, the result is a lively scene that begs a look at some first features that are also first flags of original work, whatever their origins.

About two years ago, independent film production began to emerge in Vietnam, so among the staple of higher-budget, state-financed films addressing



issues of the war and its heroes, a longer view of the country surfaced with *Bride of Silence*. In 2005 this gem-like film that works like the language of music found its echo across the globe in the personal rhythms and tones of *Play*, a vivid showpiece of the "New Chilean Cinema" movement with a nod to the *Nuevo Cine Chileno* of the 60s and 70s in its distinguished authorship. Today's 30-something Chilean directors—Martín Rodríguez (*Somewhere in the Night*), Matías Bize (*Sábado, In Bed*), and Alicia Sherson (*Play*) among them—have, like Minh Phuong Doan and Thanh Nghia Doan (*Bride of Silence*) been hosted by Germany's Mannheim-Heidelberg festival that has nourished newcomers through its well-orchestrated Mannheim Meetings for International Co-Production.

Meanwhile for seven years the Scandinavian Film Festival of Los Angeles has given considerable visibility to a new generation of film authors working outside the impressive Dogme movement of the last decade. Josef Fares has brought his own Lebanese culture to the Swedish screen with his empathetic comedies, *Jalla! Jalla!* and *Kops*, and this year with the sober and piercing *Zozo*, unforgettable for Imaad Memi's magnetic performance in the title role, loosely autobiographical of the writer-director, and Fares' own flare for a magical-real poetics of war and ethnocentrism. At the same time, Sara Johnsen's *Kissed by Winter* from Norway is no less artful in its more oblique yet impacting approach to these same themes with the focus on the northern psyche.

Tsotsi

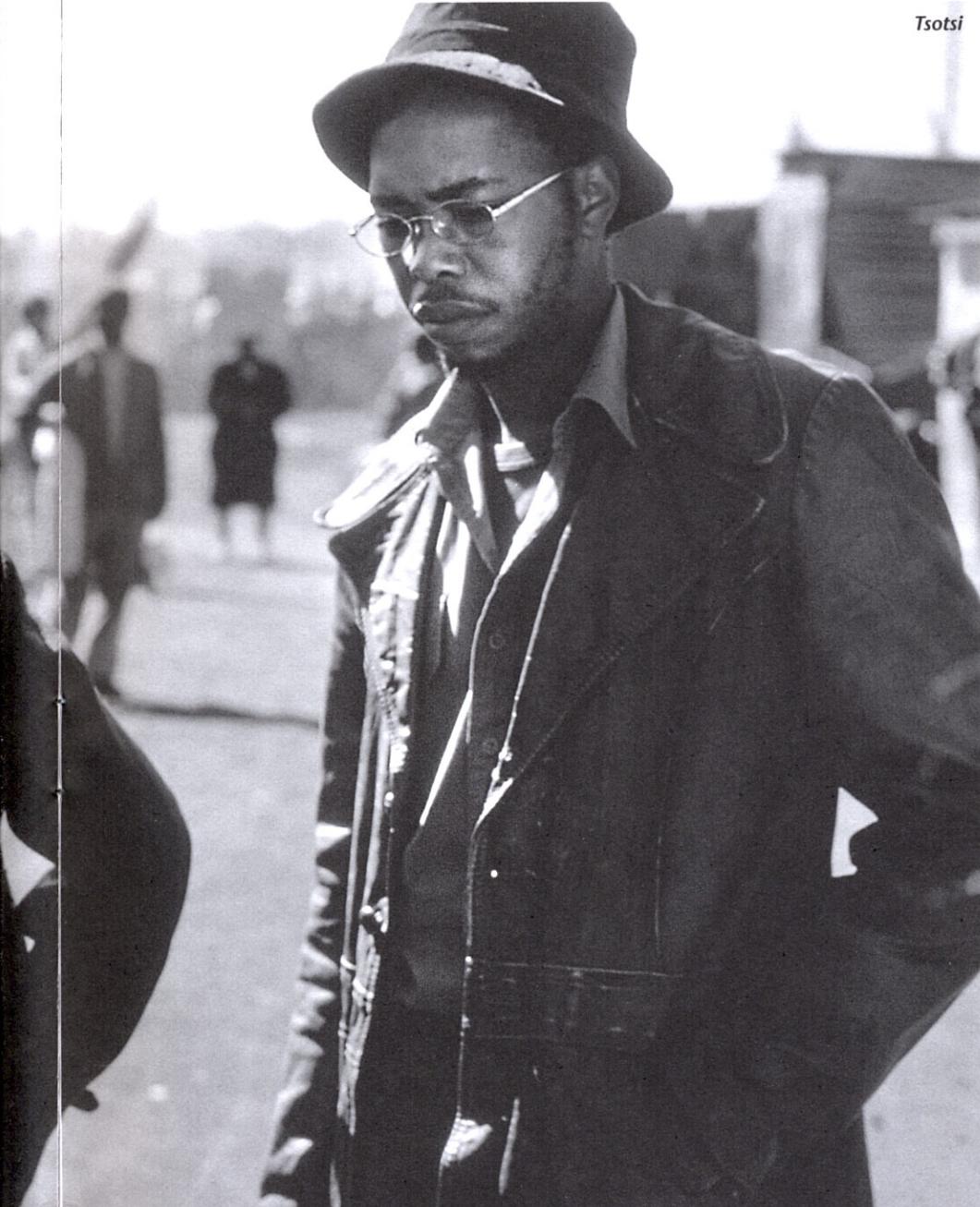
The American Film Institute's AFI FEST 2005, which since 2004 has been held in tandem with the AFM (American Film Market), featured both *Zozo* and *Kissed by Winter*, the latter winning the fest's Grand Jury Prize. The same festival saw the audience prize go to Gavin Hood's South African *Tsotsi*, a remarkable update of Athol Fugard's 1950s novel about a young street hoodlum whose head and heart are turned around by an inadvertently hijacked baby, the madonna-like single mother of another baby, and an alcoholic teacher who commands *Tsotsi*'s respect. While the township dialect and home-grown rap music keep us organically on-site, the splendid choral spirituials, color-saturated Johannesburg skyline, and stunningly designed home of wealthy black professionals transport us to a fairy tale of redemption.

Another direction entirely compels Shonali Bose's *Amu* (also featured at the AFI FEST 2005), whose female protagonist gets chided for sidestepping her comfortable middle-class American home to pursue some personal and political mysteries of life in Delhi. *Amu*, the striking self-portrait of a young filmmaker, launches our focus here on five new women auteurs whose original voices have entered the register of world cinema this year with opera primas not to be missed and talent to fund and support.

In Her Eyes

In *Amu* a UCLA film school graduate, born in India but American by life experience, returns to Delhi to get a taste of her origins and record what she sees. Though an émigré since the age of three, she feels a strange sense of *déjà vu* come over her as she wanders by herself through the markets and side roads that are deemed off-limits by Kabir, her over-protective, well-to-do male acquaintance there. Even her adoptive mother, Keya, who is herself a political activist, holds Kaju in check for taking her camera into the slums. Yet with an uncanny sixth sense, Kaju pulls Kabir into a frightening puzzle that involves both their family histories, albeit in opposite ways.

Two decades earlier, thousands of Sikhs were massacred in riots following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Kaju has never been told that this was the fate of her real parents, or worse, that a man who might have been her father was at the other end of the



genocide. Her dismay at being lied to as an individual registers on the larger scale as social and political deception in a nation that has not only covered up its history but thereby enabled events to repeat themselves, for in fact, the culmination of the film is an uprising in Gujarat in 2002.

Although Shonali Bose, who wrote, directed, and co-produced *Amu* (with her sister, Atiya Bose and Aidan Hill) was studying in Delhi in 1984 during the massacre and worked in its refugee camps, transcribing the accounts of widows to their families, she chose to tell the story through a protagonist who is an outsider so that the need for a personal identity would coincide with the probing of cultural identity. "They were all involved... the police, the bureaucracy, the government, the politicians—all" are some of the lines that India's Censor Board cut from the film's dialogue so as to bypass a history that "is best buried and forgotten." The director's response: "I accepted the cuts and thought it an even more powerful indictment for audiences to see the widows silently moving their lips. Silenced, even after twenty years..."

Minh Phuong Doan introduced her first feature film, *Bride of Silence*, which she also wrote and produced, co-directing with her brother, Thanh Nghia Doan. "How to tell the story without telling it was my task, because it's the tale of a woman who chooses not to speak," explained Phuong. To this end, the film appeals to the feelings—the passing of beauty into sorrow and longing—that art can evoke when reason or even linear storytelling fail us. The serenity of a Buddhist meditation seeps through wide mountain vistas and long tracking shots over land and water in a sadness enhanced seamlessly by two transcriptions of Bach cantatas. These fold into an enveloping score of classical Vietnamese opera introduced early in the film by a troupe of touring musicians. "Go to the stone bridge tonight to hear Miss Ha Giang," an itinerant lutist tells young Hien, just coming of age. "If you miss her, it will be long before you will hear such a voice...." The screen fades to black, the editing device for a chain of experiences that allows the teenage boy to pursue his missing mother through traces of memory.

How Long Does It Take for a Raindrop to Fall? is the film's Vietnamese title, and

through a cinematic mist it offers four alternating layers of the life of Ly An, 200 years ago when women were locked up during menstruation, bartered as property, and beaten for disobedience, and a child born out of wedlock (such as Hien) was sent down a river on a raft. "These are facts of our history passed down to me by my mother and grandmother," Phuong tells us. "In the film Hien is learning about his mother as we do, but we never see her in close-up because her story is told only through men, in the distance of time and space." The filmmakers decided to filter the color as well by shooting the entire film through a lens covered with a woman's silk stocking. The soft focus and muted tones establish the woman's silence on a visual level while her elusive voice is personified through the soundtrack's traveling diva singer. Ly An refuses to name the father of her illegitimate child, and in fact she defies all the rules of her time in her quest to move, to see, and to dream. Although the status quo of male privilege in early 19th-century Vietnam is conveyed through everyday scenes of Ly An and her mother and sisters, the filmmakers achieve more than their detailed depiction of traditions and lifestyles in the pottery-making and wood-carving villages. Events in and of themselves recede before the richly textured experience of a cinematic space etched in the music of the *Bride of Silence*.

Sara Johnsen took the Grand Jury Prize at the AFI FEST 2005 with her introspective debut, *Kissed by Winter*, which opens with long shadows of tall firs falling over twilight snow. There distant cultures cross each other with tragic blows to the heart. Victoria, a doctor who has failed to take stock of her little boy's symptoms of leukemia, flees her home and husband in Sweden to the hinterland of northern Norway after her son's death. But there an Iraqi boy's body is found encrusted in a bank of snow, and soon the mystery consumes all the village: the police who question Kai, the local snowplow driver, to investigate possible manslaughter; the dead boy's immigrant father, who fears he'll be blamed as an inadequate provider and over-stern disciplinarian when it looks like a suicide; and the boy's mother, who seeks to persuade everyone, including herself, that it was an accident.

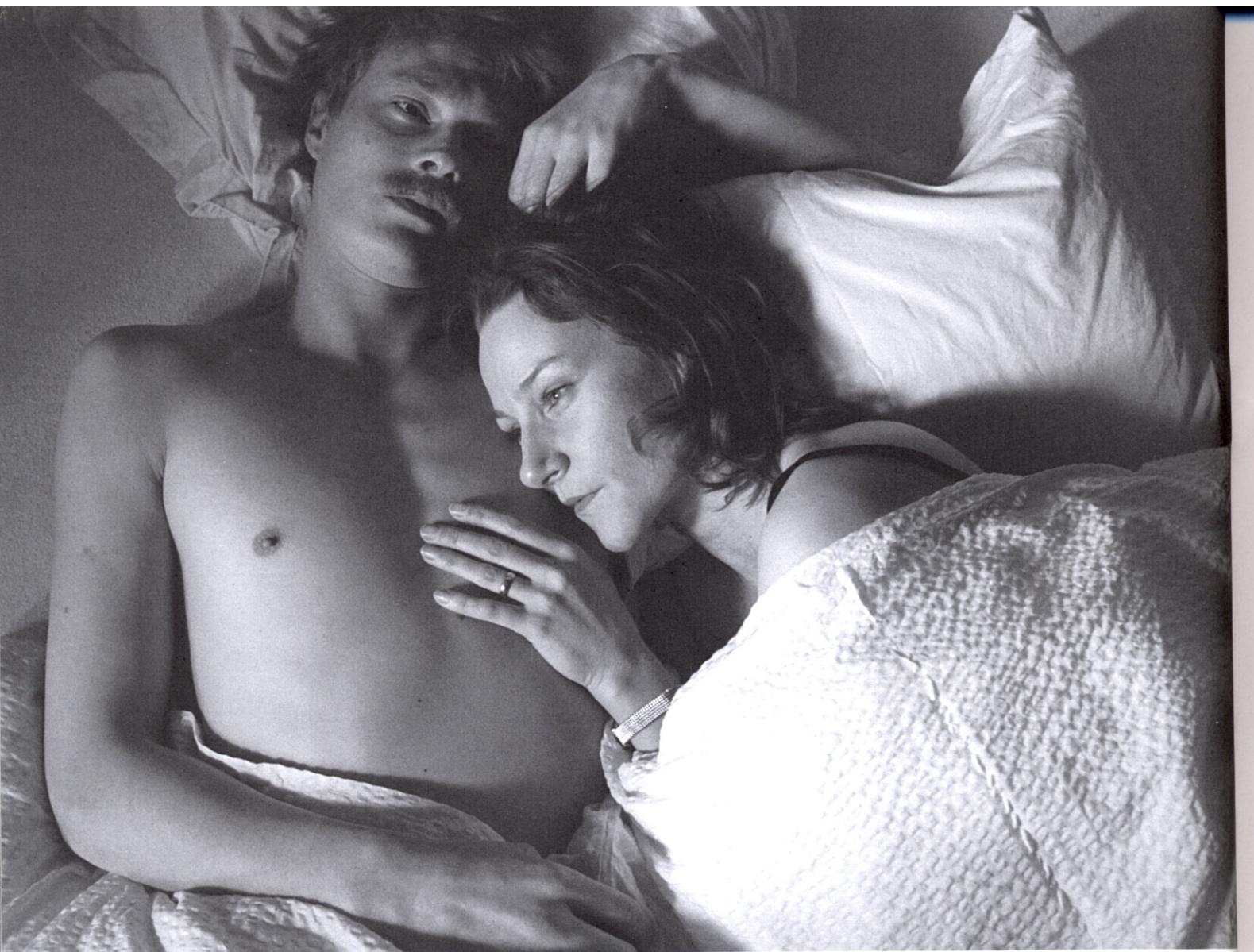
In one of the film's memorable shots,

white snowflakes whirl aimlessly across a black screen. Victoria, once challenged by her career, now seeks refuge from her recurring family memories with medical alcohol. And Kai, who isn't sure himself what he might have done with his snowplow in the dark of night, finds sanctuary in Victoria, who appears to welcome a partner in guilt until she intuits his innocence. But what of the hints of foul play? Ultimately Victoria is handed the deceased boy's journal from his mother, which allows the doctor to ponder her own son's drawings and notebook and begin the process of mourning. But of course Victoria is not alone in her grief. If she has lost her boy, the snowplow driver has just been left by his wife, and the Iraqi refugees, with the death of their son, seek only to return home with the corpse of the boy who, just days ago, took flight into the night sky over a grand ski jump with the news of a love left behind who had since chosen someone else. What is most compelling in this fractured and carefully stitched narrative is the skilled interlacing of parallel projections among characters who, while suspicious of others, share a common grief in their experience of death and disorientation, exile and defeat. Sara Johnsen delivers a taut film by disclosing information no sooner than the characters themselves are able to face their feelings, buried as they may be in their need for love.

Ryna, a favorite among critics at the AFI FEST 2005 and a winner of several awards at the Mannheim-Heidelberg festival for director Ruxandra Zenide and actress Dorotheea Petre, is the result of the filmmaker's need to bridge the languages and cultures of her life, between her Swiss residency and her Romanian heritage, with a common project, her co-production between both countries. Returning to the city of her birth, the director found her lead actress in a school for dramatic art in Bucharest and knew at once that, with her first film role in this first feature, Petre could play her alter ego who undergoes a profound quest for identity, all the while pursuing her own art of photography.

A 16-year-old girl raised as a boy, for all intents and purposes, by a selfish father who always wanted a son, Ryna spends her days as a garage mechanic in the family gas station in Sulina, a lost town of the Danube Delta. The village itself is caught between old times when





Kissed by Winter

the river connected Romania with the West—when showboats stopped by with grand style and the small promenade was a wide embankment—and its new material aspirations that belie the old myths as the extended family loses its grip in the poverty of false promises. Shot in cinemascope using Fugi film and natural light, source music and ambient sound, the site that started with a population of 40,000 people in the 1930s and is left with 5,000 now is rendered as “the place that is left behind,” and Ryna’s cohort, as the “sacrificed generation” of an irretrievable past. Still the camera searches laterally along the river and its clouds for reflections within a and its clouds for reflections within a broader frame.

A folksy country mailman gapes at Ryna from his bicycle, and a visiting French researcher measures her hands in

his anthropological documentation. Her father, feeble from his drinking habit and incapable of rising to his own needs, strikes a perverse deal with the mayor, the momentary seat of power. The harsh road of Ryna’s journey to womanhood is softened only by the poetry of her point of view, the irony of her quiet gaze, and the nuances of her own image, ever present, of clipped hair and vibrant dark eyes that see beyond their years.

In Alicia Scherson’s *Play*, Santiago de Chile is hot and heavy with pollutants, but it is also a place to lose yourself in the seduction of secret codes. As for our protagonist Cristina, we could call her Chilean, Indian, female, and working poor, but she creates her own identity in a city of others. And this is not through the dialogue, which meanders with words and grammars, jokes and dreams.

Play came to life when Scherson was studying in Chicago and thought about home. “Being far away and being a foreigner gave me a new insight into the way we define ourselves as inhabitants of a specific place. The more the world connects through the global economy and technology, the more this definition and this awareness of identity becomes diffuse and complex,” she reflects. Yet *Play* is as exquisitely stylized as it is precisely crafted.

A strategic use of color along with off-screen sound that enters carefully composed frames dilates the details of streaming life in this urban fable. *Play* introduces Cristina’s native *mapuche* roots through the refracted reports in the *National Geographic* she reads aloud to an elderly Hungarian. When he dies, her job ends, but in a quick turn she becomes the Street Fighter heroine of her favorite Japanese

video game, and soon she's out interacting with the screen's traffic light colors—red, yellow, green.

Tristan is an architect of the new Santiago, but his builders are on strike, so he's without work. Not only that, despite his flamboyant lifestyle with his wandering wife, he's falling—in fact he jumps—from a wall at his new site. When she leaves him for a Russian, he ends up at the suburban villa of his blind but theatrical mother, where life stands still under a magician's hoax, in fact the tricks of her young Argentine beau. But Cristina has the keys to Tristan's life in his briefcase that she found on the street one night. Invisible as she is in the city populace, she turns Private Eye. More detective than voyeur, she sniffs out Tristan's life to try it on for size. Shut off from the flow of the city when she dons his iPod earphones, she navigates the streets in an insulated sound bank that guides her singular style of getting in touch. Nonetheless she is drawn from a safe place of anomie to a risky zone of seeking and finding.

In *Play*, life is a game on the grid of a screen where the players pop into sight—or a void or a lull—then drop into chords and sink in their sighs with a smile, a kiss, or a jolt. In High Definition digital format the old and the new criss-cross and almost connect, the energy in-between flagging a vital space for a fusion of hearts. Alicia Sherson enters that space with a language all her own.

If this Chilean filmmaker studied at la Escuela de Cine de Cuba and then at the University of Chicago with a Fullbright, Swiss helmer Ruxandra Zenide started out at New York University and then went on to FAMU in Prague. Minh Phuong Doan left her émigré life in Bonn as a writer for ten years of research with her brother in Vietnam to prepare their film. Shonali Bose grew up in Calcutta and Bombay, and then earned a B.A. at Delhi University, an M.A. at Columbia University, and an M.F.A. at UCLA, now living with her husband/executive producer and their two sons in Los Angeles. Sara Johnsen made her film about an Iraqi family in both Sweden and Norway, where it became the country's submission for the Academy Awards. Wherever they find themselves at-home, the feature debuts of these new auteurs are impressive contributions to the world screen.

Amu

Emerging Pictures
Tel. (212) 245-6767
josh@emergingpictures.com

Bride of Silence

Tel. +84 903 808 667
doan246@yahoo.com

Kissed by Winter

www.nonstopsales.net

Play

Tel. +56 2 634 9217
parox@parox.cl

Ryna

Pacific Films
Tel. +41 22 827 1698
pacific@pacificfilms.ch

Tsotsi

Miramax Films or www.tsotsi.com
Zozo
trust@trust-film.dk

Diane Sippl is a Los Angeles-based scholar, critic, and programming consultant of contemporary world cinema and American independent filmmaking. She holds a PhD in Comparative Culture from the University of California Irvine and her teaching includes positions at UCI and UCLA. She also serves as American correspondent to the International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg.

Two Films by Amnon Buchbinder

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF CANADIAN CINEMA

BY ROBIN WOOD

Whole New Thing, the new movie by Amnon Buchbinder, appears (unlike the majority of Canadian films) to be achieving a considerable success, at least in Toronto, after its screening in the last Toronto Film Festival. It is deservedly attracting reasonably large and highly responsive audiences and is now entering its third week (his previous film, *The Fishing Trip*, only lasted one). It is, however, screening in only one auditorium in one of our smaller theatres. I want to discuss both his films in the wider context of Canadian cinema in general and especially the works of the younger generation. (It should be understood that I am talking of English-Canadian cinema; I am not qualified to discuss Quebecois).

Buchbinder is the third filmmaker of his generation to command both my attention and enthusiasm, the other two being Gary Burns and Scott Smith. Juxtaposed, their films so far reveal a strikingly similar pattern and raise questions that I would very much like to see answered. In the case of each I am speaking of two films; Burns made a third, his first, *The Suburbanators*, which I have not been able to see. Apparently it achieved a release on video, but I can't find it in any of our stores. We have, then, the following:

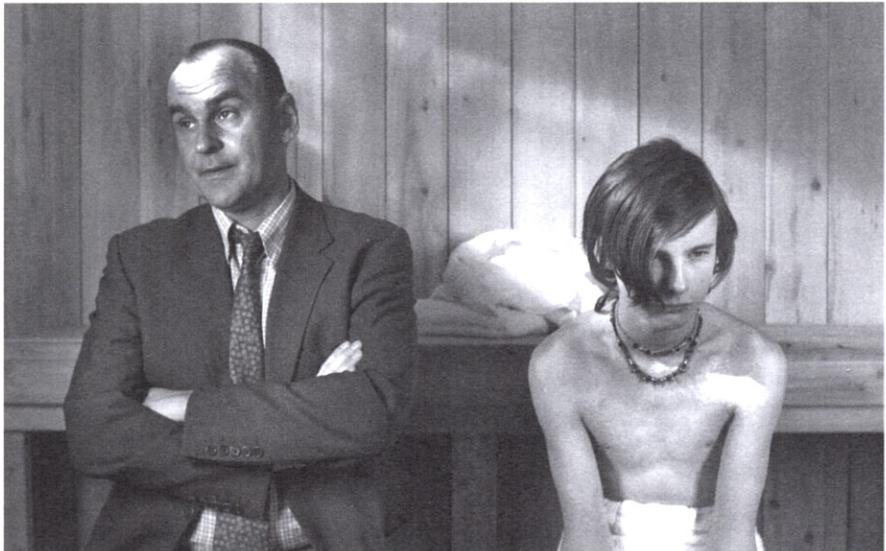
Gary Burns: *Kitchen Party*; *Waydowntown*.

Scott Smith: *Rollercoaster*; *Falling Angels*.

Amnon Buchbinder: *The Fishing Trip*; *Whole New Thing*.

In each case my personal preference is for the earlier film over the second, though the gap is narrower with Buchbinder than with Burns and Smith. With all three the first film seems more personal, more serious, more disturbing, more challenging, the second more obviously a crowdpleaser, lighter in tone, with plenty of humour, more ingratiating, as well as more polished (bigger budget), determinably 'clever'.

Predictably, in each case the second film has been the more commercially successful, not to mention somewhat better publicized and promoted. Despite this, neither Burns nor Smith has so far made another film, although a couple of years have gone by. I met Smith briefly once and he told me, with obvious enthusiasm, that he was working on a project about a gay wedding and its repercussions within the family—surely a fascinating and highly topical subject. Perhaps it is being made, but I have seen no news



Whole New Thing

of it. Why are Canadian films of the quality, intelligence and originality of *Rollercoaster*, *Kitchen Party* and *The Fishing Trip* not celebrated here in the way in which the French *Nouvelle Vague* films were and still are celebrated? True, we appear to have no Godard (or have I missed him?), but I don't see how the early films of Smith, Burns and Buchbinder are *necessarily* much inferior to those of Truffaut and Chabrol. One might compare *Rollercoaster* to *Les Quatre Cent Coups* and *Kitchen Party* to early Chabrol without absurdity.

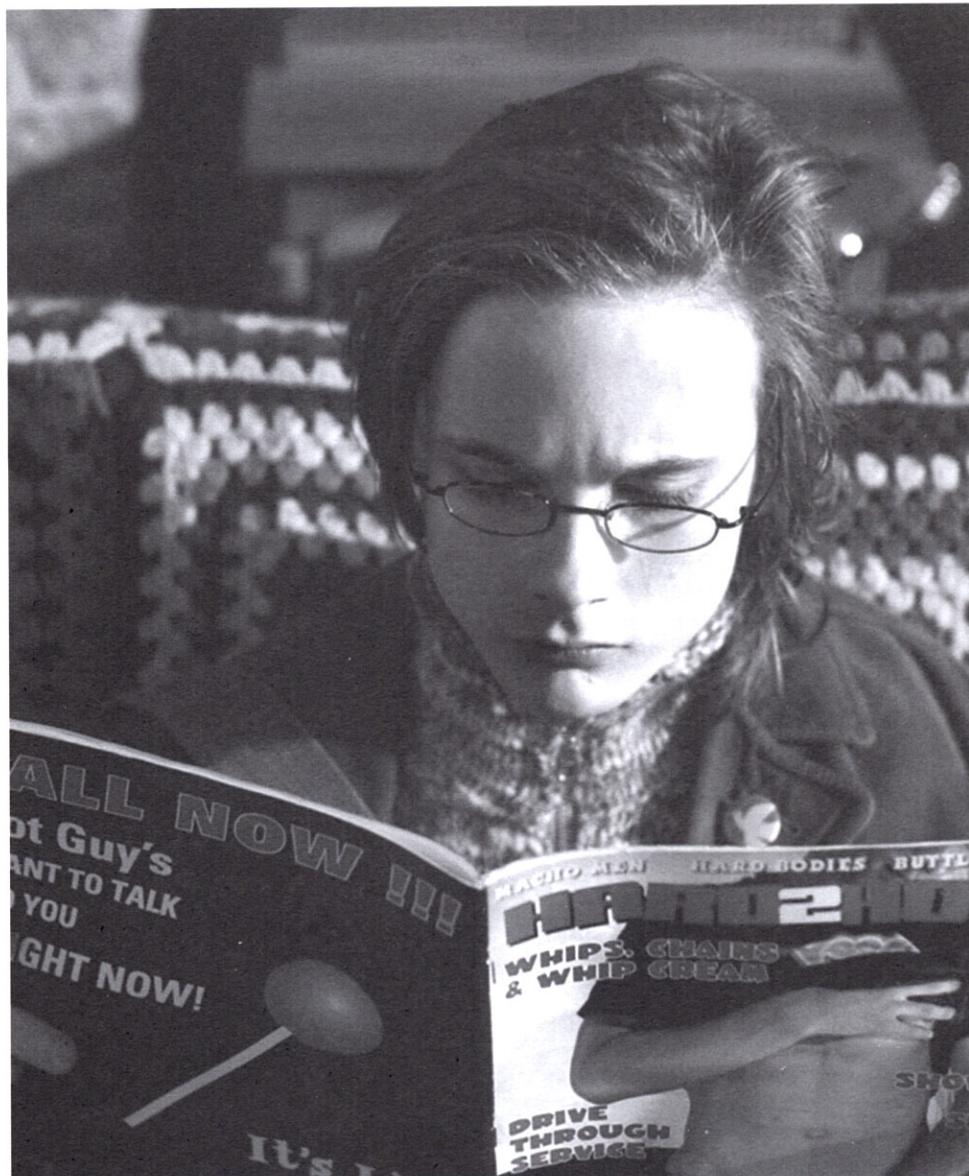
If we care about the future of Canadian cinema, these facts raise a number of important bread-and-butter questions—about financing, about publicity, about distribution. I'll consider these in that order.

Elsewhere in this issue I've complained of the shocking treatment of William D. MacGillivray's films and the consequent virtual termination of his career as a potentially major figure within mainstream cinema. There I lay the blame on the various funding agencies. I assume, however, that there are different levels (hence different responsibilities) to the business of funding: the government, the funding agencies, the production set-up... At none of these levels do I detect any serious interest in quality ('entertainment' seems the dominant criterion) or any strong commitment to developing a serious and varied Canadian cinema. I have the impression that the word 'quality' has changed its meaning over recent decades, with the advance of corporate capitalism. It used to mean 'artistically superior', but it's come to mean 'Will it make money?' To judge from results, each project is assessed purely on its own terms, with little or no sense of its possible continuity within the work of a developing artist. A possible touchstone here is the work of Ingmar Bergman (of whose films *The Fishing Trip* occasionally reminded me, a topic to which I shall return). At a very early stage Bergman's potential was recognized, and he was supported by *Svenskfilmindustri* through thick and thin (mostly, for many years, thin) in film after film, most of them box office failures. No one, apparently, ever suggested to him that his films should be more 'audience friendly'. His films (even those early ones) are now available all over the world, many reissued in box sets, with learned commentaries, whole discs with

supplements, retrospectives in Cinematheques... If he had been treated, in his early days, as MacGillivray has been treated, as Burns, Smith and Buchbinder will probably be treated, he would by now be forgotten. And this was in a far smaller country than Canada, but a country that had some sense of standards, some awareness of intelligence and talent, some ambition beyond box office receipts. I am glad that Buchbinder has had a degree of success with *Whole New Thing*, but I hope it doesn't eclipse the darker vision of *The Fishing Trip*.

Clearly, one important aspect of Buchbinder's talent is his rapport with actors. The three female stars of *The Fishing Trip* give performances that are consistently marvellous in characterization, nuance and aliveness, and they play wonderfully to each other as an ensemble—which is doubtless what, besides the film's intensity, conjured up memories of Bergman. Kirsti (Jhene Erwin), though she never hogs the show, gave me another epiphany. There is a sequence around the film's midpoint where she is simply walking down a country road amidst dense woods, telling her sister Jessie (Melissa Hood), who is offscreen for much of the sequence, about the continuing consequences of her childhood trauma (raped by their stepfather): a series of long takes which she sustains magnificently. What suddenly came into my head was 'My god, we have a potential Julia Roberts here!' I know opinion is divided on Ms. Roberts (I am among her admirers), and Ms. Erwin may not take this as a compliment. In any case, the resemblance is transient. But what I did see was that elusive phenomenon 'star quality', demonstrated in the ability to carry an extended sequence singlehanded. I could imagine a film written for her and built around her performance. But if she has appeared in a film since *The Fishing Trip* I have not seen it, nor have I read any acknowledgement of her performance. Which suggests another aspect of cinema in which Canada appears to show little interest, the cultivation of 'stars'.

Take the strange case of Sarah Polley. Polley has, from the outset, expressed a commitment to Canada and a reluctance to work in Hollywood. She is a serious and dedicated actress who has the charisma of a 'star', as anyone who has seen (for example) *Guinevere* knows (but



Whole New Thing

who has seen it? It had a brief release then disappeared). One would have expected that projects would have been built around her, with her co-operation, as they were around Hepburn, Davis, Colbert... She may have had projects of her own. However, despite her commitment, she is currently driven to accepting minor roles in undistinguished American films: in my opinion a tragic loss not only to Canada but to cinema in general.

Publicity/Availability

The failure successfully to promote Canadian films has resulted not only in poor box office returns but also in their short lives. The current relative success of *Whole New Thing* owes little to publicity (there has been no advertisement for it in the *Toronto Star* for the past few days). Its success seems to be the result of critics' enthusiasm and good word of mouth. *Rollercoaster* and *The Kitchen Party* both came out briefly on DVD (the former with a director's and actors' commentary), but are already hard to find. Did they sell out and were not replaced, or did they just sit on the shelves gathering dust before they were jettisoned because no one knew what they were missing? I devoted a whole chapter of my book *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film* to MacGillivray, but no one ever mentions it, it is never used (as other chapters frequently are) in university film courses. Why? Because no one has ever seen or even heard of *Life Classes*: it has never been released even on video outside Canada, and even here copies are almost impossible to find. I make 'pirate' copies of it sometimes when asked, but the actual video is faded and scratched. Does all this go back to a government that appears to have little interest in the development of a healthy Canadian film culture? Doubtless *Whole New Thing* will come out soon on DVD (hopefully with a director's and writer's commentary and a 'making of' documentary), but what of *The Fishing Trip*? May we hope that at the very least it is included as an 'extra' with *Whole New Thing*? All these films, including and above all MacGillivray's, should be permanently available to the public within Canada, and at least given a fair chance outside it. Indeed, if anyone wants to bring out DVDs of *Life Classes* and *Understanding Bliss*, I'd be proud to offer a critic's commentary free of charge.



The Fishing Trip



The Fishing Trip

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